

A Lancer Science Fiction Original

STARBLOOD

DEAN R. KOONTZ



Can a crippled mutant overcome
the secret masters of tomorrow?

Never before published

THE HOUND

entered the room, sensed Timothy's presence, made sure that he was the proper quarry. It fired three pins.

Timothy slammed down on his mobility controls, streaked into the hall and down the cellar stairs. He slammed the heavy door of the shooting range. It was monstrously thick, plated in lead. Even the Hound would require time to break it down.

He floated along the cellars that stretched back into the mountain, ripping the paneling away from the walls with his servos, and squeezing into the old part of the house.

Behind him, he heard the heavy door explode before the attack of the Hound . . . and ahead was a cave-in, trapping him in this room, his pursuer no more than thirty feet behind.

He turned, and saw the Hound's sensors gleaming in the dim light . . .

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"There was no 20th century hallucinogenic so heinous as PBT—slang for Perfectly Beautiful Trip. We're still plagued by it in this new century. The substance cannot be analyzed, and there is no known way to break an addict of his habit. Addiction leads to non-involvement with productive society, an early loss of mental capacities, and too frequently, death. Many drugs, hallucinogenic and otherwise, seem to offer rich rewards to their addicts, but if there is one person in the world who has ever gained from PBT, his must be a singularly odd case indeed . . ."

Address by Chief of Narcotics Bureau,
World Health Organization

". . . a singularly odd case . . ."

PROLOGUE

Timothy was not human. Not wholly.

If you include arms and legs in a definition of the human body, then Timothy did not meet the necessary criteria. If you count two eyes in that definition, Timothy was also ruled out, for he had but one, and even that was placed in an unusual position: somewhat closer to his left ear than a human eye should be and definitely an inch lower in his overlarge skull than was the norm. Then there was his nose: it totally lacked cartilage; the only evidence of its presence was two holes, ragged nostrils punctuating the relative center of his bony, misshapen head. There was his skin: waxy yellow like some artificial fruit and coarse with large, irregular pores that showed like dark pinpricks bottomed with dried blood. There were his ears: very flat against his head and somewhat pointed, like the ears of a wolf. There were other things which would show up on closer examination: his hair (which was of different texture than any racial variant among the normal human strains), his nipples (which were ever so slightly concave instead of convex), and his genitals (which were male, but which were contained in a pouch just below his navel and not between his truncated limbs).

There was only one way in which Timothy was even remotely human, and that was in his brain, his intellect. But

even here, he was not entirely normal, for his IQ was slightly above 250, placing him well within the limits of "genius."

He was the product of the artificial wombs, a strictly military venture intended to produce living weapons: beings with psionic abilities who just possibly might bring the Asians to their knees. To a certain type of military mind, the human body is little more than a tool to be used as the officer wishes, and such were the men in charge of the wombs. When results like Timothy slid from the steamy chambers, gnarled and useless specimens, they shook their heads, ignored public condemnation, and went on with their mad work.

Timothy was placed in a special home for subhuman products of the wombs, where it was expected he would die within five years. It was in his third year there that they came to realize Timothy (he was the T birth in the fifth alphabetical series, thus his name) was more than a mindless vegetable . . . it happened at feeding time. The nurse had been dutifully spooning pap into his mouth, cleaning his chin as he dribbled, when one of the other "children" in the ward entered its death throes. She hurried off to assist the doctor, leaving Timothy hungry.

Due to the training of a new staff nurse that afternoon, he had inadvertently been skipped during the last meal. He was ravenous now. When the nurse did not respond to his caterwauling, he tossed about on the foam mattress. Legless and armless as he was, there was nothing he could do to reach the bowl of food that rested on the table next to his crib, painfully within sight of his one, misplaced eye. He blinked that eye, squinted it, and lifted the spoon without touching it. He levitated the instrument to his mouth, licked the pabulum from it, and sent it back to the bowl for more.

It was during his sixth spoonful when the nurse returned, saw what he was doing, and promptly fainted dead away.

That same night, Timothy was moved from the ward.

Quietly.

He did not know where they were taking him. Indeed, lacking the sensory stimulation afforded most three-year-olds, he did not even care. Without proper stimulation, he had never developed rational thought processes. He understood

nothing beyond the basic desires of his own body: hunger, thirst, excretion. He could not wonder where they were taking him.

He was not permitted to remain ignorant for long. The military hungered for success (they had only had two others) and hurried his development. They tested his IQ as best they could and found it slightly above average. They were jubilant, for they had feared they would have to work with a psionically gifted moron. Next, the computers devised an educational program suited to his unique history, and initiated it at once.

They expected him to be talking in seven months: he was verbalizing in five weeks. They expected him to be reading in a year and a half; he was quantitatively absorbing on a college level in three months.

Not surprisingly, they found his IQ rising. Intelligence quotient is based on what an individual has learned, as well as what he innately knows. When Timothy had first been tested, he had learned absolutely nothing. His slightly above average IQ score had been garnered solely on that native ability. Excitement at the project grew until Timothy no longer reached a meaningful IQ of 250. It was now eighteen months since he had lifted the spoon without hands, and he was very nearly devouring books, switching from topic to topic, from two weeks of advanced physics texts to a month of nineteenth-century British literature. The military didn't care, for they did not expect him to be a one-field expert, merely educated and conversant. At the end of eighteen months, he was both these things. The military turned to other plans . . .

They coached his psionic abilities carefully. There were dreams in military minds, of Timothy destroying the entire Asian Army with one psionic burst. But dreams are only dreams. The fact was soon evident that Timothy's psi powers were severely limited. The heaviest thing he could lift was a spoon full of applesauce, and his radius of ability was only a hundred feet. As a superweapon, he was something of a washout.

The generals were disappointed: after the initial paralysis

wore off, they opted to dissect Timothy to see what they could discover of his ability.

Luckily for him, the war ended.

The Bio-Chem people came up with the ultimate weapon. They released a virus on the Asian mainland at roughly the same time the army was discovering Timothy's limits. Before the generals could act on him, the virus had destroyed approximately half of the Asian male population—it was structured to affect only certain chromosome combinations that occurred only in Mongolians—and had induced the enemy to a reluctant surrender.

With peace, the wombs were put under the administration of the Bio-Chem people, and the project was dissolved.

But the scientists were still fascinated with Timothy. For three weeks, he was exhaustively tested and retested by his new masters. He overheard their discussions about "What his brain might look like . . ."

It was a rugged three weeks.

In the end a leak reached the press and the story of the horribly deformed mutant who could lift spoons without touching them was a three-day sensation. The Veterans' Bureau, the largest bureau of the now peace-oriented government, stepped into the uproar and took control of him. Senator Kilby announced that the government was going to "rehabilitate" the young man, provide him with servo-hands and a grav-plate system for mobility.

He was a three-day sensation again. And so was the politically wise senator who took credit for his rehabilitation . . .

CHAPTER 1

Timothy stood on the patio that jutted beyond the cliff and watched a flock of birds settling into the big green pines which spread thickly down the mountainside. He was fascinated by nature because it contained two qualities he did not—an intricacy of purpose and general perfection. As most normal men are intrigued by freaks, so Timothy was intrigued by the nature of normalcy. He directed his left servo-hand to pull apart the branches obscuring his view of a particularly fine specimen. The six-fingered prostho swept away from him on the grav-plates that cored its palm, shot forty feet down the embankment to the offending branch, and gently pulled it aside so as not to disturb the birds. But the birds were too aware: they flew.

Using his limited psionic powers, Ti reached into the two hundred micro-miniature switches of the control module buried in the globe of the grav-plate system that capped his truncated legs. The switches, operated by psi power, in turn maneuvered his hands and moved him about as he wished. He recalled his left servo now that the bird had gone. It rushed back to him and floated at his side.

He looked at the watch strapped to the servo and was surprised to find that it was past time for his usual morning chat with Taguster. He flipped the microminiature switches and

floated around and through the patio doors, into the somewhat plush living-room of his house.

The house was the pivotal spot of his life, giving him comfort when he was depressed, companionship when he was lonely, a sense of accomplishment when his life seemed hollow. He had built it with money earned from his two volumes of autobiography, a proud monument built over the ruins of a Revolutionary War, pro-British secret supplies' cellar. It was maintained by the revenues from *Enterstat*, the first stat newspaper devoted to gossip and entertainment, a project launched successfully with the book monies.

He crossed the fur carpet and glided into the special cup-chair of his Mindlink set. Raising a "hand," he pulled down the burnished aluminum helmet and fitted it securely to his bony cranium (the helmet too had been specially crafted). He used the other servo to flip the proper toggles to shift his mind into the receiver in Taguster's living-room.

There was a moment of blurring when intense blacks and grays swarmed formlessly about him. It was said that this was the moment when death tried to rush into the vacated body—and when the Mindlink circuits dissuaded it from claiming another victim as it wished. Then his consciousness flashed onto the Mindlink Company's beam past thousands of other entities going to other receivers. In less than a second, the blacks and grays swirled dizzily, then cleared and metamorphosed into colors. The first thing he saw through the receiver was Leonard Taguster lying dead against the wall . . .

For a moment, he attempted to break away from the artificial brain blank and the camera eyes of the receiver, tried to plunge back into the chiaroscuro world of the beam. Taguster simply could not be dead. And if he were, then Ti simply could not admit it. There was, after all, no one else in his world, no one with whom he might talk with ease, as equal; no one else who would easily understand him. After Taguster, there was only the house, and the house could not converse. Then the core of him, which had survived so much in the past, gripped him and forced him to cease his childish flight from reality. He settled firmly into the receiver again

and looked out through the glass eyes of the cameras attached to the brain blank.

No, Taguster was not dead. There was blood, surely, pooling about the concert guitarist's head, but the same head was also moving, nodding in near unconsciousness, but nodding nonetheless. Ti operated the voicebox of the machine, spoke in a mechanical harshness. "Lenny!"

Taguster raised his head a little, enough for Ti to see the thin dart buried half in his throat. Taguster tried to say something, but he could only manage a thick gurgle, like syrup splattering against the bottom of a galvanized bucket.

Timothy felt a silent scream welling up inside him, heard it booming deep within him. A moment later, he realized it was not silent, but given voice by the receiver. That frightened him, and he looked away from the wounded body of his friend, trying to regain his wits. Darts? Who would want to kill Leonard Taguster? And why hadn't they finished the job?

The musician made frantic noises, as if he desperately needed to communicate something. His head bobbed, jerked, as convulsions hit him. Ti wished he had not looked back. Taguster's eyes were wide open and brimming with tears. He knew he was dying.

Ti's mind swam inside the receiver, receding into the swirl of black and gray, then surging into color and life again as his fear of retreating overcame his fear of remaining. He was fighting off inglorious panic, and he knew it. But Taguster wanted to say something and that was the important thing to remember. But how could that be accomplished, with the man's pale throat so horribly violated?

Taguster scrabbled a limp hand against the wall as if writing without implement, and Ti got the idea. He turned the head of his receiver around so that the cameras showed him most of the room. There was a desk with various writing tools lying on it, a mere twenty feet away against the far wall. But a receiver was not mobile—and Taguster could not move. Ti thought of retreating from the receiver and returning to his own body, calling the police from his house. But Taguster's desire to communicate was too intense to ignore.

Ti squinted eyes that he didn't have (the cameras could

not rightly be called eyes, and his own single orb was at home, lying lopsided in his irregular skull) and forced his psi energies to coalesce in the vicinity of the desk. He reached out and toyed with the pencil. It flipped over and almost rolled onto the floor. He doubled his effort, lifted it, and floated it across the room to where Taguster lay dying. He imagined he was sweating.

Taguster picked the instrument up and held it as if he were not certain what it was. He coughed bright blood, stared at that a moment. When Timothy urged him to write, he looked up blearily at the receiver cameras, seemed to make an expression of assent . . . or pain. He wrote on the wall: MARGLE. The letters were shaky and uneven, but readable. Then Taguster sighed, dropped the pencil. It made an eerily loud sound as it clattered on the slate floor.

"Lenny!"

Timothy seemed to remember having heard the name before, though he could not place the source. However, he felt justified in slipping out of the set now to call the police. But as he was loosening himself from the brain blank, someone screamed.

It was a woman; it came high and piercing, bursting out full strength and turning into a gurgle, trailing away in seconds. It had come from the bedroom, and Ti tensed his mind and shifted into the bedroom receiver extension.

It *was* a woman. She had been trying to get out of the window, but her flimsy nightdress had caught on the latch, delaying her one moment too long. There were three darts in her back. Blood dripped off the frilly lace and onto the floor.

Ti had been working under the assumption that the killer had left. Now he shifted the camera to the left and saw the murderer.

A Hound floated toward the doorway, twin servo-hands flying ahead of it, fingers seemingly tensed as if to strangle someone. The dart tube on the burnished belly of the spherical machine protruded, ready. Here was the killer: thirty-odd pounds of ball-shaped computer that could track with seven sensory systems.

And only the police should have one.

But why should the police want Taguster dead . . . and why should they choose such an easily traced means of obtaining his destruction?

The Hound disappeared through the doorway, suddenly reminding Ti that Taguster was back there in the living-room, half dead. The Hound was returning to check on its work. Ti shifted his consciousness into the main receiver again.

Taguster was in the same position, still gurgling. When the mechanical killer entered the room, the dying man saw it.

Ti found a curio, a small brass peasant leading a brass mule, a handcrafted trinket Taguster had brought back from a trip to Mexico. Lifting with his psionic power, he threw it at the Hound with all the force he could muster. The toy bounced off the dully gleaming hide and fell harmlessly to the floor.

The Hound drifted toward Taguster, firing tube open.

Timothy found an ashtray, tried to lift it but could not manage. He cursed the limitations of his power. Then he remembered the gun on the desktop, lying opposite the pencils, heavy and ugly. He touched the pistol psionically, but could not budge it. He pressed harder, eventually moved it slightly until the barrel pointed directly at the Hound. Pulling the light wire of the trigger was easy enough. The gun spat a narcodart that bounced off the beast with no effect other than to elicit a scanning by its sight receptors.

Then the Hound shot Taguster. Four times in the chest.

Timothy felt as if all his energy had been sucked out of him by an electronic vampire. He wanted only to fold up, shrivel in upon himself, and slide home into his temporal shell where, at least, he could gain succor from his books, his films, his house. But he could not let the Hound escape. He sent the cameras swiveling in search of articles small enough for his talent to handle. He found a number of trinkets and figurines and rained these uselessly upon the machine.

The Hound surveyed the chamber, perplexed, firing darts in the direction of the hurled souvenirs, unable to discover its

assailant. Then it turned a spatter of darts on the receiver head and floated out of the room, out of the house and away . . .

CHAPTER 2

For a time, Ti remained in the living-room staring at Taguster's corpse. He felt too emotionally weakened to move elsewhere. Memories flipped past his mind like a parade of lizards, tail flicking after tail, cold claws sunk into his brain. With each came more realization that there would be no more experiences with Taguster, no more conversations to be stored for later retrieval and reflection. What he remembered now was all that he would ever have. When a friend dies, it is much like a candle flame being snuffed—the warmth and brightness gone, leaving a vague recollection of what it had once been like.

He broke from Taguster's receiver and allowed his mind to flow into the Mindlink beam, through the penumbra landscape, back into his own body. He sat for a moment, regaining lost energies, and slowly became aware of the tears welling out of his eye and running down his pallid, clammy skin. He was not crying so much for Taguster as for himself—for the one thing he feared more than all else was loneliness. Those days and nights when he had been hopelessly immobile in the government hospital preyed on him now. The forgotten terror of being unable to communicate was renewed and metamorphosed into anguish. There were few men with minds as alert and as deeply structured as his own, few who could possibly be close friends. Indeed, Tagus-

ter was the only one he had ever called friend . . . and now he had no one at all.

The flow of his own tears finally forced him to lift the helmet from his head and shut off the machine, forced him to come to grips with the situation. If his greatest weakness was his almost irrational fear of loneliness, then his greatest strength was his ability to stand alone. His weakness and his strength were two sides of one coin. He sat there, letting the tears dry on his face, and thought through the events of the last half hour.

Ordinarily, he would have wasted no time in summoning the police. But it had been a Hound that had murdered Taguster, and that was a distinct complication. If some—or any—legal authorities had conspired to take the musician's life then it was madness to let them know there was a witness to their murder. He had to know more of the story behind the killing, though he had nothing but a name: Margle.

He rose from the cup-chair and crossed the room, moved through a painting-lined corridor and into the library he prized so much. He threw a toggle along the wall, next to the comscreen; a panel slid back, revealing a computer keyboard, a direct line to the *Enterstat* computer. He punched out the letters of the name and depressed the bar marked FULL DATA REPORT.

Thirty seconds later, a printed stat sheet popped out of the information receival slot and into the plastic tray, glistening wetly. He waited a moment for it to dry, then reached with a servo and picked it up, shaking it to release any static that might make it curl. He held it up and read it, blinking now and then as a stray breath of the copying fluid drifted upward and stung his eye.

Klaus Margle. He was connected with the Brethren, the underworld organization that had encroached on the territory once held sacrosanct by the older Mafia—and had finally deposed and destroyed the elder organization because it controlled the supply of PBT. PBT had replaced nearly all other drugs and quasi-drugs in man's eternal quest to avoid the unpleasanties of modern life. Since gambling and prostitution had been dignified by liberalized laws, drugs had become the

chief commodities of the underworld. It was rumored that Margle was the chief Don of the intricate counterculture of illegality, though this information could not be checked for authenticity.

Physically, he was six feet tall and weighed two hundred and eighteen pounds. His hair was dark, but his eyes were a surprising baby blue. He had a three-inch scar along his right jawline: source unknown. He was missing a thumb on his right hand: reason for amputation unknown. He believed in taking part in the common dangerous chores of his organization; he would not send one of his men to do something he had not once done himself—or would flinch from doing now. He was a man of action, not a desk-chained executive. He currently dated Polly London, the rising young senso-starlet who had appeared in *Enterstat's* glamour section more often than any other woman. Klaus Margle. End of information.

This explained the Hound and brought a touch of sanity to the surreal atmosphere of the crime. The underworld could obtain anything it wanted; it was rumored that half the city's officials were on the gift sheet of the Brethren. Through one or more of those men, Margle's people had secured the Hound. Which made it quite possible that Timothy would be putting his nonexistent foot into a nasty patch of briars if he should contact the police.

Punching the number for the *Enterstat* editor's private desk phone, he waited while the comscreen rang the number. The two-dimensional medium was almost entirely a business service now that the three-dimensional, full sensory Mindlink had taken over communications for more intimate purposes. It also served as a very private means of contact for people like Timothy. In a moment, the blank screen popped with color, and the face of George Creel, *Enterstat's* editor, swam into view like a fish speeding toward the side of his glass aquarium. It settled into proper proportions, held still. The big man's melancholy eyes stared out at Timothy. "Morning," he said. "What's going on?"

There was no subservience in his tone of voice, though he had a great deal of respect for his boss. It was the sort of respect that did not need to be vocalized, for both of them

knew it existed. Ti also regarded Creel highly. The man was efficient, intelligent, and had gone through enough years of hardship and terror to be tempered into a fine precision instrument. Creel was black, and had been eleven years old during the Black Wars. He lived in Chicago when that city attempted to break away from the rest of the nation. The boy survived the final battles when many children had not, and the years of distrust and hatred which followed molded this present man.

"I want some information on a story prospect, George."

"Writing again?" Creel asked.

"Just something that interested me," Timothy said, hoping he could hide his roiling emotions.

"Who is it?"

"Klaus Margle. He dates Polly London. Missing a thumb on his right hand. Scarred on his face. And he may be the Don of the most influential family in the Brethren."

"I'll put some researchers on it. Tomorrow okay?"

"I want it inside an hour."

"It'll take four or five good men."

"Deadlines too tight?"

"No," Creel said. "I can spare them. Call you in an hour." He signed off on his own authority, his face dwindling until it had disappeared altogether.

Timothy mixed himself a strong whiskey sour and waited. The quiet of the house seemed unnatural. But even after he slipped a cartridge into the stereo tape deck, the place seemed hollow, like a pavilion after a political congregation: cold. He was glad for the strident buzz of the comscreen an hour later.

"He's some fellow, isn't he," Creel said.

"Stat it," Timothy said, anxious to see what the staff had found.

Creel placed the documents under his recorder scope, one sheet at a time, then punched the transmit button. Moments later, wet copies dropped into the tray in Ti's wall. He restrained himself from rushing forward to look at them. Creel, he could tell, was already too interested. Timothy did not want to blow any of this until he knew exactly what was

going on. It was not that he did not trust Creel. It was only that he trusted himself more. Creel would have acted the same way.

When all the papers had been received, he thanked the observant black man and rang off. Nestled in a comfortable cup-chair, power off in his grav-plates, servos holding the data sheets, he thought he could see Leonard Taguster's face in the print, formed by the letters. He quickly blinked the illusion away and studied the reports.

When he had finished reading everything the researchers had found on Klaus Margle, he knew beyond doubt that the man was the chief of the Brethren. The list of other underworld figures assumed liquidated under his auspices became awesome. By studying the list, Timothy could see the story of an industrious and ruthless criminal genius assassinating his way up the ranks and into the top roost.

The information also showed that it had been a wise move not to contact the police. Klaus Margle had been arrested nine different times—and had been released each time for “lack of evidence.” If the police investigated this, without strong supportive evidence, Margle would go free. Then he would come hunting a societal reject named Timothy . . .

He was thankful, now, for his self-sufficiency. This business could not be turned over to police until he had possession of conclusive evidence that Margle could not buy his way out of. He was going to have to handle it himself, using all the connections in his power and every point of his high IQ.

Activating his grav-plates, he went to the Mindlink set, slid in, and coupled up. He was not going to enjoy returning to that house where the musician and the girl lay in their own blood. It was bad enough losing a friend, but to have to handle that friend's corpse in the manner he planned made him distinctly ill.

A moment later he was settling into the brain blank in Leonard Taguster's living-room receiver. The body was still there, twisted grotesquely in death agonies. He looked quickly away, but found his eyes drawn back like metal filings to a magnet. He focused the cameras on the closet door he wanted. He hoped Taguster still kept the thing

where he used to. Ti palmed open the closet door with his psionic power. Warning lights flashed amber and red, and a loud clanging alarm sounded. He shut those off and looked inside—at a perfect likeness of the musician, except that, unlike its model, it was not full of pins and slicked with blood.

Taguster had commissioned the production of the simulacrum to help him avoid the adulation of his fans. It always forced its way through crowds, bullied past young girls waiting at his hotel—while he walked quietly in the back door or followed an hour later when the people had gone. Its complex brain was cored with Taguster's memory tapes and his psychological reaction patterns, making it possible for the fake to pass as the real even in the company of casual friends—although someone as close to him as Timothy could not be fooled for more than a moment.

Ti reached psionically under the flowered sportscoat the machine wore and brought it to active status; its eyes opened, unclouded, and attained the same penetrating gaze that Taguster was famous for. "You," Ti said. "Come here." But despite the fact that he was trying to be businesslike, his voice was hoarse.

It walked out of the closet and stopped before the receiver. For a moment, Timothy could not bear to order it to do anything; it seemed as if such an act would demean the memory of the real Taguster. But such orders were necessary to the success of the plan. "You recognize my voice?" he asked it.

"Yes."

"And that I am one who is permitted to give you instructions?"

"Yes."

"Sim, there is a young woman at the window in the bedroom. Dead. Get her and bring her into the utility room off the kitchen. Don't spill her blood on the carpet. Go."

The robotic device walked briskly off toward the bedroom with the same slight lopsided gait that had been his master's. A moment later it returned, the woman's body cradled in its arms. The blood had ceased to flow and was drying in her nightdress. She had been a truly beautiful woman—but there

was no time to contemplate that now. The simulacrum stalked across the room and out of sight.

Timothy shifted into the kitchen receiver and watched the machine carry her into the utility room. He could see only a portion of that area through the open door, for there was no receiver in there. "Empty the freezer," he directed the simulacrum. It complied, piling the hams and roasts and vegetables on the floor.

"Now put her body inside."

It did this too. Ti tried not to envision the bloodied girl-corpse lying in the rime-frosted icebox . . .

He directed the robot to retrieve Taguster's corpse and to do the same with it as with the woman. If it should require any length of time for his plan to work through, he wanted to be certain the bodies were well preserved for a future autopsy. It was gruesome, but it was the only thing he could do. He had seen worse things in his lifetime, of course . . .

When both bodies were in the freezer and the food they replaced was dumped into the incinerator chute, he sent the simulacrum about the house cleaning up all traces of the murders, scrubbing blood from floorboards and carpet, washing the wall down where the musician had scribbled on it. When the machine-man had finished, the place looked completely normal, quiet and serene.

"Sit down and wait for me," he directed it.

It complied.

Timothy returned home on the Mindlink beam. In his library, he hovered before his typewriter and used his nimble servos to compose a new headline story for the four-thirty edition. Polly London would surely read the paper to see if she were mentioned, and it was quite conceivable that she would pass along this story to Margle if Margle didn't subscribe to *Enterstat* himself.

When he finished the piece, he rang Creel on the com-screen. The face ballooned out of the center of the tube, and the shiny black eyes gazed out. "Was the data complete enough?" he asked.

"Fine, George. Look, I have another story that goes in the four-thirty edition. Tear out the lead already in the master

statter, no matter what it is, and put this in with two-inch caps."

"Stat it," Creel said.

He did. Seconds later, he saw it drop into Creel's desk tray. The editor picked it up and read it over. "What's the headline?" he asked, picking up a grease pencil.

Ti considered a moment. "Ah—CONCERT GUITARIST VICTIM OF WOULD-BE KILLER."

"He's not got that sort of reputation with the average middle-age gossip seeker. And the murder wasn't even a success. So you've got reasons beyond putting out a good edition."

"Yes," Ti said.

Creel waited a moment. When he saw he was not going to get any further details, he nodded his head and broke the connection.

Ti returned to the Mindlink set and to Taguster's house. The simulacrum was waiting where he had left it, hands folded demurely in its lap. That was the quickest way to delineate between the mechanical and the real man. Leonard Taguster had been a man supercharged with nervous energy, always moving, doing, looking, reading, talking, feeling. He would never have sat anywhere in such patient anticipation. Ti considered his next set of directions a moment, and then said, "Call the Harvard Detective Agency and contract one of their best investigators. Tell him an attempt was made on your life and that you want him to discover who was behind it. Tell him you want to see him tomorrow after you've compiled what information you can. Four o'clock tomorrow, tell him."

The simulacrum followed Ti's instructions. Then it turned to Ti as the screen went blank behind it. "Anything else?"

"Not yet. You might as well go inactive." When the machine had returned to its chair, Ti used his psi talent to palm the shut-off switch beneath the loud sportscoat. The thing sagged in its chair; its eyes clouded, and in a moment it seemed to be asleep.

At four-thirty, *Enterstat* would report an unsuccessful attempt on Taguster's life and that the Harvard Agency had

been hired to investigate. If Margle read the story, he would call Harvard, perhaps posing as a friend willing to pay Taguster's bill, concerned about the musician's welfare. The firm would either agree or say Mr. Taguster would have to approve. And Margle would think his man was still alive. Then, given his propensity for personal involvement, Margle just might take it upon himself to discover first-hand why the police Hound had failed in its mission. Timothy was counting on that. He waited, nervously . . .

Ti had everything prepared. The movie camera was positioned back in his own house, right next to the Mindlink set, ready to be jacked in and record on film whatever transpired in the house of Leonard Taguster. If only Margle would show . . .

At ten to ten, the comscreen burred.

And burred again . . .

Quickly, he activated the android. Its eyes blinked, unclouded. It stood erect and strode off to the comscreen just as naturally as if it had been awakened from a sound nap. It punched to receive the call. The big screen lighted, although no image was being received—just dazzling whiteness. The android, though, was transmitting and being received. Klaus Margle—for who else would not want his face seen on the comscreen?—was getting a full-face view of the man he had ordered destroyed and had thought dead.

"Who is this?" the simulacrum asked.

There was no reply.

"Who is this?"

The comscreen went dead. The other party had rung off without saying a word.

The android returned to his chair and looked at the Mindlink receiver. "Did I act correctly under the circumstances?"

"Yes. Yes, you did."

"Then, would you tell me what those circumstances are? If I am to perform as well as expected, I must be thoroughly grounded in the situation."

The simulacrum was not in the least interested in its master's death, which it surely must have grasped by now, hav-

ing helped to dispose of the corpse. It was only concerned with meeting expectations. Timothy was not sure whether a machine benefited or suffered from its lack of humanity.

After a briefing, they sat in silence. When darkness came, they turned on the softest lights. At ten o'clock, Timothy realized he had not eaten anything all day—and that he was terribly thirsty as well. But he dared not leave the receiver to attend to the needs of his body. Margle might arrive while he was gone. At a quarter after eleven, then, they heard the first sounds of the intruder . . .

CHAPTER 3

There was the crackling of wood splintering under great strain, then a sharp crash as the kitchen door was wrenched from its frame. The simulacrum rose and strode off toward the kitchen. Timothy shifted into the receiver there. The door was, indeed, bowed out of its frame, shivering as something heavy struck it again and again from the other side. Then it gave; the latch ripped loose and clattered noisily across the room. The door swung inward; the house had been breached. Beyond floated the Hound . . .

At first, Timothy was confused, unable to understand why Margle would have sent the same mechanism to do what it had failed at once before. Then he understood that there must be men outside, waiting, and he felt better. Mentally he smiled as he realized that the Hound might very well fail again, since the simulacrum was not vulnerable to any of its weapons.

The Hound detected the mechanical Taguster, lurched, and whined almost like a real dog. It surged through into the gloomy kitchen and fired half a dozen darts. The pins struck in the pseudo-flesh of the simulacrum, but the poison could do nothing to its nonhuman system of wires and tubes. The Hound swung to the left and shot another six darts into the mechanical's side. Again, the weapon failed to kill or cripple.

The simulacrum advanced on the Hound.

Ordering its servos ahead, the Hound latched metal fingers around the fake Taguster's neck. The second servo battered at the simu-flesh face. The simulacrum's nose bent. It reached up and grabbed the Hound's servos, tearing them loose from itself. It turned and rammed the ends of the metal hands against the walls, snapping some of the fingers. Pieces of metal tinkled on the floor. Wires and insulation hung from the shattered digits. The hands of the Hound floated where they were, grav-plates still operational but unable to heed the commands of their master.

Ti ordered it captured and destroyed.

The simulacrum moved forward and grabbed the sphere. The Hound strained to move away from the machine-man, but it was no match for the powerful arms that restricted its movement. It shot darts into the simulacrum's chest, but to no avail. The fake Taguster dragged the assassination machine across the room and thrust it hard against the wall again and again until the housing over the grav-plates buckled. It ripped the housing off, pulled the plates from their connections, and tossed them across the room, where they floated above the sink.

"Toss it back outside," Timothy said.

The simulacrum obliged, walking onto the platform of the rear patio and heaving the alloy beast over the edge. There was an explosion of sound as what had been the Hound struck the driveway. It shattered into a dozen or more large pieces; nuts and bolts and slivers of glass rolled across the pavement. The simulacrum came inside again and crossed to the receiver. It was time for more waiting.

Minutes passed, then half an hour, and Ti began to worry that they might have scared off the men outside. Just as he was ready to verbalize his fears to the simulacrum, there was the unmistakable sound of shoes squeaking on the patio stairs coming up from the rear lawn.

Timothy dropped into the Mindlink beam, returned home, and activated the cameras filming off the visual two-dimensional comscreen. When he returned to Taguster's home, frantic he would have missed something, the Brethren gunmen had not yet arrived.

They entered two seconds later, preceded by tear gas grenades. The kitchen filled with acrid blue-green fumes that soon roiled through into every room in the house. Moments later, three dark figures came through the doorway wearing breathers and waving pin guns around like small boys playing with newly purchased toys. Timothy focused the cameras on them and was elated when he discovered Margle's face. He did not take the cameras off their faces, but the intruders were oblivious to him. When they saw the simulacrum, they decided it was Taguster with a breather of his own, and they opened fire.

The darts sank in the robot's chest, but they had no effect. The machine continued to advance on them.

One of the trio palmed the light switch. In the ensuing brilliance, they saw all the darts puncturing the simulacrum and knew the thing for what it was. They holstered their guns, moved in on it, pinned its arms, and shut down its systems.

"Search the place," Margle ordered. His voice, Timothy was surprised to discover, was rather reedy, ineffectual, almost silly. Yet it had a quality of viciousness that demanded it be obeyed.

When they had searched the enormous house to their satisfaction, they met in the kitchen again. Timothy followed them via the receiver. They exchanged negative reports, and as Margle was outlining a suggestion for a search of the grounds, one of the henchmen with him noticed the soft light of the bulb on the Mindlink set, indicating the occupation of the brain blank. He pointed it out to Margle and approached the set with his gun butt drawn back to smash the glass in.

"No!" Margle snapped, pushing the man aside, hunkering directly before the cameras so that Timothy had a full-face view of the scarred, angry features. Timothy saw that Klaus Margle had that same cool efficiency, the same self-confidence that he and Creel possessed. But it went further than that. In the terror and pain of getting to the top, Klaus Margle had rejected the smaller goal of learning to cope and command in favor of the larger goal of being able to dominate and demand. It was the same chilly madness that infected dictators.

"We'll trace you," Margle said. And Timothy knew that was true. The Brethren could easily afford the services of a Mind-link technician who would not be against picking up a tidy sum for some swift extracurricular—and extralegal—work. "We'll trace you, and then we'll come for you." He grinned. It was an almost effeminate grin, his lips too full and sensuous for that scarred and battered countenance. Then he raised his pistol butt and smashed in the glass . . .

Half an hour later, just as Timothy finished running the film through automatic developing equipment, Detective Modigliani arrived from the city police in response to the call Ti had placed immediately after returning home from Taguster's house. At first, there had been some hesitance about sending a detective to the house, since Timothy refused even to state what his problem was. But when they had discovered who he was, all the red tape seemed to shred through like crepe paper.

Modigliani was a thin, intense man with a pencil mustache and a quick way of moving that made him seem somehow birdlike. He introduced himself in tight, sharp words, his voice thin and almost irritating. Ti ushered him into the living room with all the courtesy he possessed, correctly deciding that Modigliani was not the type to respond to more forceful techniques.

When they were both seated, the thin man said, "This is most unusual."

"It's an unusual case."

"Tell me." He made it seem as if Timothy was the criminal and not the good citizen reporting a violation of the law. When Ti finished the story without eliciting even a raised eyebrow from the detective, Modigliani said, "Quite extraordinary. And you say you have the film?"

"Yes."

Modigliani scowled. His eyes were hooded cobra eyes. "You've invaded someone's privacy, you know."

"What?"

Modigliani did not move any part of his body even a fraction of an inch. It seemed he was carved of stone. "It's an

invasion of privacy to use the communications media to photograph others in their own homes."

"But I was getting evidence!" Timothy protested, already aware that protest was useless.

"That's the work of the police," Modigliani countered.

"I know," Ti said desperately, trying to hold his rising anger in check as he rose from his cup-chair, "that Klaus Margle has been arrested nine times without serving any time whatsoever."

Modigliani shifted forward a little at the waist, as if the stone sculpture was cracking. "What are you suggesting?" Again, he had the look of a bird—a predatory bird.

Ti restrained himself. "Nothing. Nothing. But would you like to see the films? That's what I asked you here for."

Modigliani nodded his interest, and Timothy led the way into the library, where the projector and screen were prepared. He dimmed the room lights. The projector hummed, and the screen was filled with images out of a surreal fantasy. Eddying clouds of smoke, then three dark figures with small breathers clamped in their nostrils. The picture zoomed in on the leader of the raiding party, and there was Klaus Margle. Ti shivered at the cruel, delicate yet scarred face of the underworld Don.

But there was *only* his face. As the film progressed, Ti discovered he had been so anxious to get good shots of Margle's face that he had missed all the damning action they had been involved in. The camera had been trained only on their heads, catching only hints of the fight with the fake Taguster. The threatening face of the last few feet of film lost all force when the words and their harsh tone were absent. It was almost a friendly smile without the words behind it.

The film stuttered, slipped, was gone. "Not much," Modigliani said. When Timothy weakly began to argue, the detective interrupted. "Faces." You could have filmed Mr. Margle almost anywhere."

"But the tear gas—"

"And I didn't see him killing anyone. I still think we should be concerned with an invasion of privacy here, rather than murder."

Timothy saw the futility of disagreement, but he felt bound to argue. In the end, he could manage only to persuade Modigliani to call Taguster's house. Either the receiver would be broken, giving credence to his story, or they would meet Klaus Margle and his men. But, to Ti's horror and surprise, Leonard Taguster's face popped onto the comscreen, smiling. "Yes?" he asked.

Modigliani turned and gave Timothy an I-told-you-so look of infuriating cheerfulness.

"It's the simulacrum," Timothy hissed.

Modigliani turned to the fake Taguster, explained the details of the situation. The mechanical Taguster laughed heartily at the notion he might be dead and agreed to allow the detective to inspect his house through the Mindlink receivers there, fully confident nothing would be found.

Five minutes later, Modigliani had been there through Mindlink and had examined the place in detail. "Nothing," he told Timothy as he removed the normal helmet which Ti kept for the convenience of guests who couldn't very well use the one specially formed for his misshapen skull.

"The kitchen receiver—"

"Was in fine working order. I don't know what you wish to prove—"

"They had the services of a technician, an electronics expert. In an hour and a half, it could just have been done."

"And Taguster?"

"That was not Taguster! It was his simulacrum, damn it!"

"Sims will do nothing to harm their masters; Leonard Taguster's sim would never protect his owner's murderers. Besides, the killers would have to be among those whose voices the robot was programed to obey. You've told me that only Taguster, his manager, and you have that ability."

"They could have reprogramed the machine," Timothy said.

"That takes a real expert," Modigliani said, feigning obviously phony surprise at such a suggestion.

"You know as well as I that they could afford it. And they could have had just enough time to fix that bent nose, too."

Modigliani's seeming stupidity was beginning to annoy

Timothy until he wasn't able to suppress his rage any longer. His twisted face flushed and his servos danced nervously. Then Modigliani gave him the name of the game. "Sir, I must caution you to refrain from slander. Mr. Klaus Margle is nothing more sinister than the owner of several garages and restaurants. A hotel too, I think. He is a respectable businessman who should not have to suffer abuse that—"

Ti interrupted. "You know damn well that Klaus Margle is—"

"This is being recorded, and you must be informed of that if you intend making actionable statements." He parted the halves of his coat to reveal the mini-recorder strapped to his chest.

It was obvious now why Modigliani was being hard-headed. He'd been bought. When he had learned that the accused was Klaus Margle, he had seen where his duty had lain—and it wasn't with truth or the police department. Ti realized his own rage would be interpreted as the inane prattling of a misfit when the time came for Modigliani to prove him an unreliable witness. Any jury, hearing the tape, seeing the twisted form it had issued from, would declare Margle innocent.

He had never felt more isolated and alone.

"I'll have the film and be going," Modigliani said, returning to the library.

Timothy floated quickly after him, but he was too late. When he came through the library doors, the detective had removed the film from the projector and was returning, the cartridge tucked firmly under his arm. "You can't have that!" Ti snapped.

"You violated a man's privacy. We'll have to show this to Mr. Taguster and see if he wishes to place charges against you. We will be in contact with you in the near future."

And he was gone.

Timothy stood at the window, watching the detective leave. He knew full well that the film would be destroyed between here and police headquarters. The tape record would be edited as Modigliani saw fit before it was placed in police files. And the detective would receive a bonus from the

Brethren this month, a bonus for a job well done—if not exactly in the interests of the public he had sworn to serve.

He returned to Taguster's house, ignored the simulacrum, which was reading a book and greeted him cheerily. He went from room to room, looking for even the smallest sign of murder or of the later presence of the Brethren gunmen. He found nothing. He returned home.

In despair and frustration, he pounded the leather of the Mindlink cup-chair with his servo-hands. Then, when his rage subsided, he saw he had clawed and ripped it until the stuffing showed through in many places. Now he was no longer able to weep for the loss of the musician; now there was only a cool, deep hatred for those people—and a determination to get them, to kill them. Strangely, the thought of murder did not repulse him, though he had always been extremely nonviolent. He had reached that time in his life—as most men eventually do—when powers greater than he had so relentlessly and ruthlessly backed him into a corner and begun shredding at the fabric of his life that no response was too excessive. With many men, it is the government, a king or a dictator or a president. With others, it is a large corporation, a blank bureaucratic monolith without a single shred of humanity. For Timothy, it was these men who took the law into their own hands—with the blessings of the authorities who earned part of their living from them.

Fury. It was worthwhile sometimes. Now, as he waited for the arrival of Klaus Margle, he did everything possible to nurture it . . .

CHAPTER 4

He stood at the window, nervously watching the night. Time ticked by like water dripping from a faucet.

Behind him, there was a pistol from his collection propped between a stack of books, aimed at chest-level on the door. He could trigger it with his psionic powers when the time came. In his servo-hands were two more weapons. There was no use asking for police help. All calls would be routed to Modigliani, and that would be a dead end. These lethal devices were all he had to stop them from killing him as nonchalantly as they had killed Taguster.

He heard them as they entered the courtyard behind the house. They made no attempt to keep silent, blundering noisily along to let him know they had no fear. Footsteps on the pavement. Then a soft burst of laughter . . .

The door rattled, shook. It crashed inward as the Hound, yet another one, smashed through in a cloud of wood splinters. Ti had not been expecting this at all. His guns were absolutely useless. He turned into the dining area, dropping the pistols and calling his servos after him. He had been expecting men, not machines. Now what? He heard the Hound in the kitchen, but by the time he reached the living room, it was humming into the dining area, on his heels.

Don't panic, he told himself. Don't panic—just hate. It's only the hate that will save you.

The Hound entered the room, sensed his presence, sought him with its cameras and radar grids, ascertaining if he were the proper quarry or not. It would only need a split second to make that decision . . .

He sought an escape route—though he realized that the great house which was equipped to sustain him in luxury was not equally appointed to preserve him from death. The place would be surrounded; the doors were useless. Suddenly, he remembered the Revolutionary War cellars upon which the house was built. If he could get into those, there were countless outlets to other places on the mountain.

The Hound fired three pins.

Ti slammed down on his mobility sphere speed controls, streaked into the hall, through the cellar door and down the steps (there for the convenience of his legged guests). He crossed the Tri-D room and went into the shooting range, slamming the heavy door behind him. It was monstrously thick, resurrected from the Tory cellars. It was a munitions storehouse door, plated in lead. Even the Hound would require some time to break that down.

He floated along the left wall where the cellars lay behind the thin skin of his house, stretching far back into the mountain.

After the first four or five, which were man-made, the caves were rough and fortified. When he reached the end of the room, he used his servos to rip loose the half-round that filled in the corners of the plasti-wood paneling. Metal fingers gripped round that paneling, he proceeded to pry it away from the wall beams. He looked through, seconds later, into the cool darkness of the Tory cellars.

Behind, the Hound struck the leaded door, hard.

Unable to squeeze between the beams, Ti shifted his grav-plates so he lay on his side, then moved ball-first through the gap and into the darkness. Once inside, he shifted to vertical position and sent his servos back to restore the panel as best they could. It might confuse the demon machine for a few minutes, though it could not be a completely successful ruse. The Hound would be after him soon enough.

Through the partition, he heard the door to the shooting range give; then it crashed inward to admit the Hound.

He moved forward slowly, letting his eye adjust to the lack of light. Soon he could distinguish the outlines of fallen beams and broken tables, of rotted and shattered chairs, a few stretches of shelving that had once held ammunition but which were now bowed and warped away from the walls and covered with ugly lumps of fungus. He moved into the second cellar room.

Behind him the Hound ripped loose the wall panel he had balanced in place, the sound echoing frantically in the cul-de-sacs of the Tory chambers. Light from the shooting range dispelled the gloom. The Hound came quickly after.

Ti moved toward the third cellar at top speed. He slammed his shoulder stump into a half-fallen beam, but he kept moving, his hatred and his fear denying the pain his nerves insisted was there. The Hound came faster.

When he reached the entrance to the fifth cellar, Timothy found nature had conspired against him. There had been a cave-in, and the beams and rocks of the ceiling had collapsed to effectively bar his escape. With the Hound at his neck, there was no time to break through.

He turned on his pursuer. Its sensors gleamed in the dim light, thirty feet away. It fired three pins . . .

He moved aside as he saw its intent. The darts studded the rubble wall behind him, where they quivered like arrows. He sent his servos to an overhead beam lying in the Hound's path and had them worry its tenuous connections with the rotting ceiling. Just as the Hound passed beneath, the beam tore loose and crashed into it. The only effect was a momentary deflection in the machine's course. The Hound swerved, bobbed, recovered in only moments and swept closer, firing another three pins.

All three missed. Ti was surprised, for he had not had time to take evasive action—and Hounds were not known for sloppy marksmanship.

The Hound fired three more; again, they all missed.

Ti abruptly realized he was turning them aside with his

psionic power! The second time, he had been more conscious of his effort. Now he stood with his back to the collapsed ceiling, waiting the next attack. It fired, and the darts spun away to either side. Over the next several minutes, he deflected another two dozen of the slender spines. The Hound ceased shooting and bobbled gently from side to side, regarding him with its measuring devices. A moment later, it dispatched two servos for his neck . . .

Reacting quickly, he called his own servos to him. Four feet from his face, the enemy's hands and his own met and locked, metal fingers laced through metal fingers. He set full power into his hands and tried to snap the other set of prosthos.

His hopes for a swift triumph were destroyed when he saw the Hound had similar ideas. Its own servos wrenched at his, the four members swaying back and forth in the air, gaining and losing the same space in a rhythmic duel. Finally, when both sets reached full power and stress, they did not move at all, but merely strained in frozen tableau against each other. The grav-plates on all four hands erupted almost simultaneously in smoke and sparks. The metal hands dropped to the floor as if they were a single creature, a metal bird with shot pellets in its wings.

Now both hunter and hunted were handless. Hunter and hunted . . .

Timothy realized the nomenclature was no longer adequate. With both of them handless, and with Ti able to neutralize the pin weapon, the balance of power had been equalized. As he moved past the Hound, he was aware that another facet of his power had made itself known tonight. Under moments of stress and anxiety, he seemed to acquire new abilities. The hate had been valuable, and he would still need it. And with his power to influence small objects in transit as well as when they were still, he might be able to give vent to the hatred when he encountered Klaus Margle.

The Hound stopped following him when he moved into shooting range again. It bumped purposelessly against the beams, as if its mind had been in its hands and, losing them, it had lost all cleverness. Ti floated upstairs and stopped in

the hallway to listen. He could hear footsteps in the kitchen . . .

He was prepared for them. Confidence surged through him, augmenting his hate. He drifted into the living-room just as the gunmen walked in with their weapons drawn. "Your Hound is finished," he said, drawing their attention from the areas of deeper shadow which they were cautiously exploring.

The man on Margle's left swung and fired. Timothy deflected all but one pin, lifted that and turned it back on the gunman. The dart sank into the Brother's chest, its poison exploding into his bloodstream. He gagged, doubled over, and dropped.

"I won't kill you if you surrender," Timothy said wearily. The hate was still there, but a deep welling sadness had joined it.

Margle and the remaining man were crouched behind a sofa, unwilling to surrender merely because of a lucky shot. In the dark, they could not have seen that his hands were gone. "You're crazy," Margle said, his voice high and sharp, grating on the nerves. He was quiet, waiting for Timothy to speak and reveal his position.

"Why did you kill Taguster?" Ti asked, remaining at the same place.

"Why tell you?" Margle asked. There was a giggle in his voice, an edgy little laugh that sounded almost sadistic. Apparently, they could not see him yet.

"You're going to kill me. Or I'll kill you. Whichever way, telling me why you murdered Taguster won't make much difference, will it?"

"He was on PBT," Margle said.

"What excuse does that give you for killing him?" To discover that their reason was so thin made the death seem all the more meaningless to Ti and resurrected the hatred which had begun to die in him.

Margle chuckled, as if lax and unwatchful—although he was not. His kind of man never was. "It was getting too expensive for him. He decided to gather information on us. The Narcotics Bureau has never been able to synthesize the stuff,

even with samples they obtained. Taguster was trying to get enough to give them some sort of clue so that, in return, they would make him a legal addict. Then he could get PBT free from supplies the UN has confiscated. One of his paid informers informed to us. We ransacked his house while he was out, found the file he had on us. Not much, but enough to get a good many people sold down the river—which means something might leak to help the UN find out what the stuff is.”

“That shouldn’t have bothered you. You could buy the authorities off.”

“Local, not UN. Did you ever try bribing a UN delegate officer, the kind they have in narcotics? Impossible.”

“So you killed him.”

Margle was still trying to pin him down, keep him talking long enough to level a fairly accurate barrage at him. “The Hound did. You were pretty clever about that, you know. Had us worried. But calling the local constabulary—now that was a stroke of pure idiocy. It made finding you much easier.”

Ti knew enough now. There had been a side to Taguster he had not known. It hurt him a bit to think the musician had not fully trusted him, but all of that was past now. Taguster was dead. He moved toward the couch, making no effort to conceal himself.

“There!” Margle shouted. Both men rose, seeing him in the same instant, and fired point-blank into his twisted body.

He deflected all the pins.

Then Ti was behind the couch and on top of them. They danced backwards, opening fire. He returned the pins, getting Margle in the cheek and the gunman in the neck. They died with such precision that it seemed like a grotesquely choreographed dance.

He left the room and phoned Creel, getting him out of bed. He asked for two reporters and two cameramen to cover all angles of the incident. Creel, true to form, asked no questions; he merely wondered if he might come over too. He smiled slightly when Timothy said yes.

As Ti waited for his people to arrive, a weariness settled

over him like a hand sliding onto a glove. He had once made a promise to himself that he would never kill. It had been a way of making amends to the gods—if there were gods—for having been the product of an experiment of war. And now he had broken that promise in order to avenge the death of his only close friend. It was going to take some time before he would be able to think this through, to learn and understand which was the most precious: integrity of one's self, or unlimited love and devotion for another human being.

He could not cry. He wished he could—that might relieve the tension. But Taguster was dead, his mind and personality beyond retrieval, and the world still turned. The hate would have to be dissolved, burned down, disposed of. A man could not live with such hatred. No matter how he had been hurt. He decided that, after the statsheet people and the police left, he would get roaring drunk. And stay drunk for two or three days. And then everything would be fine. He was sure that would end it . . .

CHAPTER 5

A darkly painted personal grav-plate automobile, without benefit of any chrome fixtures, drifted up the mountainside in the dim wash of moonlight that managed to filter through the relatively heavy cloud cover of the humid summer night. The craft's interior lights were off, as were its headlamps and its fore and aft warning beacons. It was nothing more than a shadow among other shadows, and its power plant had been insulated against emitting noise so that the illusion of ethereal unreality could be maintained; it was a ghost searching the night, nothing more.

In the forest below, small animals scattered for cover into burrows and holes in rotted trees, somehow aware of the machine's presence. But the rest of the world knew nothing of it.

Farther up the cliffside, an ultra-modern house jutted from the forest, perched precariously on thrusting fingers of rock. Despite its advanced design, it seemed an integral part of the natural forces around it. The driver of the grav-car had required several minutes, at first, to make out the lines of it. Now, as he drew closer, his admiration for its architecture increased, even though he would soon take steps to destroy it utterly.

He held the car steady as it drew level with the house, and when he was certain it was deserted but for its owner and single occupant, he took his craft up again. When the car was

above the roof of the house, with the entire grounds of the mansion visible below it, the driver put his machine on hold, opened his door, and released the package he had been sent to deliver.

The package was a cylinder three feet long, tapered to a round bullet snout at both ends, with a central diameter of twenty inches. It was featureless, its burnished coppery metal husk shimmering in the moonlight. It was quite heavy, though it did not drop any faster than a bit of dandelion fluff might have. It slid level with the house, changed from vertical to horizontal progression, and passed by the long windows of the cliffside patio. It was noiseless and efficient-looking. And though its design gave no indication of its purpose, it had an air of deadliness about it.

Overhead, the grav-car moved cautiously along the side of the mountain, hugging the dark, jagged shapes of the trees, and slipped swiftly into the envelope of the night. Only when it was a mile away did the driver flick on the lights. And even then he phased them in slowly to avoid drawing the attention of another craft or someone on the ground. Five minutes later, fully illuminated, he picked up speed and returned to the garage from which his mission had begun.

And all the while, the Selective Assassination Module he had left behind him was cutting an entrance portal in the glass patio doors. A jointed arm extended from the anterior end, tipped with a diamond cutting edge. As it worked, a fine glass powder fell to the flagstones. When the work was near completion and all but a perfectly circumscribed entrance had been cut, a second arm appeared, spidery but agile, and attached itself by a suction cup to the glass that would be removed. When the final cut was made, this new arm removed the circle of glass from the door, lowered it onto the patio floor, and released it.

It moved forward and into the darkened living-room. Timothy's house had been breached once again, but with a far greater degree of subtlety than Klaus Margle had employed some two weeks ago . . .

Though some moonlight found its way between the heavy velveteen drapes, the interior of the mansion was much

darker than the night world beyond its confines. The SAM opened the receptivity of its visual scanners; two points on its anterior and two on its posterior, all the size of quarters, changed color from the fire-flecked coppery hue to yellow, emitting a slightly fuzzy amber radiance.

The thin spindles of the tool arms had been retracted and left no trace of their exit and entry in the smooth hull. Other devices, as yet unused, could also be called forth and put away without trace. Such dexterity and heavy armament were possible through extreme microminiaturization; and the machine's power source was not contained within its housing. It gained operational energy from a broadcasting generator some miles away. It was an expensive means of murder. Weapons Psionic, its makers, charged whatever the traffic would bear, limiting its clientele but clearing excellent profits on those devices it did construct. And, though expensive, it was foolproof. Weapons Psionic had no known headquarters, files, or staff. Though massive efforts had often been launched to discover the whereabouts of the company, both federal and United Nations police had failed miserably to uncover even a trace of it. Even the purchasers of its merchandise were ignorant of company's home. But those who bought the SAM liked that, for it meant that none of them could sell out Weapons Psionic and thus destroy a valuable tool of the underworld. A SAM provided anonymity for the killer, a perfectly untraceable means of murder. And for men closely watched by the authorities, such a cold, clueless tool as this was priceless.

The SAM's supersensitive receptors began to function now. The heat sensors directed the killer's attention toward a hallway on the right which more than likely lead to sleeping quarters. The aural pickups correlated the initial data by the heat sensors, and the assassin turned toward the hall.

It allowed its "ears" to listen: light breathing, a ragged sound of air moving through deformed nasal passages.

It permitted its heat sensors to probe longer: a quantity of body heat radiating from the very end of the corridor.

It drifted quietly forward . . .

At the end of the hall, it ceased forward progression and

rose on a level with the bedroom door handle. A thread of metallic substance weaved out of the husk and disappeared into the door's automatic mechanism. The seeking filament touched the motor within, and the portal slid soundlessly open. The SAM retracted the thread, hesitated, then slid forward into the dark, seeking . . .

It located the twisted body of the mutant lying in the sling bed against the far wall. It called forth a dart nozzle from its anterior snout and fanned the body with fifty poisoned spines. There was no sound from the form as they sank in; the poison would be too swift for that.

The SAM used the filament to turn on the overhead lights, then drew the thread back into its husk. When it was only half a dozen feet from the mutant, the amber light was bright enough to reveal that the target was not dead. There were no darts in it. Instead, the spines prickled the wall behind and littered the floor below. The assassin stopped, fired another series.

They were deflected.

Timothy rose from the sling bed and set his servos after the SAM. He was quite aware that the thing might have more than one weapons systems, and that if he did not act quickly he might end up a corpse despite the advantage of his psionic powers. The assassin drifted backward toward the door, but a servo slipped past it and closed the portal. Ti wondered if it wouldn't be better to let it escape. Then he realized he would have nothing to show the authorities, no way to ascertain the identity of his assassin. He would be left waiting for their next attempt, helplessly—like a man in a stalled car on railroad tracks, watching the locomotive screaming toward him . . .

A nozzle protruded from the SAM's husk, spewing a napalm-like chemical. But the deadly bright flames did no harm, since Timothy was able to deflect the chemicals on which the flames depended. A moment later, his servos clasped the device at each blunt end and held it still. Timothy flushed a wave of psionic power through the cylinder, flicking closed all the switches in the SAM's guts, which all succumbed to the relatively light pressure of his ESP ability.

The slight yellow luminosity of the sight sensors vanished as the device opaqued its hull and was still. In seconds, it had ceased to be a flame-spouting, dangerous antagonist and had become a docile hunk of metal.

Cautiously, he directed his servos to release the weapon. They moved away from it, and it did not respond in any fashion. Since its grav-plates generated their own power, it remained weightless, though stationary. He took the cylinder down the corridor, through the living room, into the library. On the keyboard of the *Enterstat* computer, he punched: REQUEST SOURCE OF THIS DEVICE. DESCRIPTION AS FOLLOWS. After the description, in which he did not ignore any detail no matter how trivial, he pushed for a full data report.

While he waited, he decided it must be the Brethren who were after him; surely his murdering Klaus Margle would have temporarily angered the man's cohorts. Then again, he had opened a position in the hierarchy of the underworld, and he could only have made a friend of the man who filled it. Yet only the money of the full organization could have purchased a device such as this; a splinter group of Margle's friends could never have financed it. His thoughts were interrupted as the data statted into the receival tray.

He picked up the sheet, startled by the brevity of the report on something so intriguing as the assassination device:

SOURCE OF WEAPON: WEAPONS PSIONIC . . . ADDRESS UNKNOWN . . . NO MEANS OF CONTACTING WP; MAKES OWN CONTACTS WITH PROSPECTIVE CUSTOMERS . . . NO OFFICES . . . NO FILES . . . NO EMPLOYEES . . . WEAPONS CANNOT BE TRACED TO PURCHASER IN ANY KNOWN MANNER . . . WEAPONS CANNOT BE TRACED TO POINT OF PRODUCTION . . . PARTS OF WEAPONS CANNOT BE TRACED TO POINT OF PRODUCTION.

This was all very interesting, but it put him no further ahead. Someone had been contacted by Weapons Psionic and had agreed to purchase the killer. But who? And if it was the Brethren—why? He would have to answer that before he went to the police, if he went to them at all. And to get his

answers, he would need to know more about this device. He went to the comscreen and called George Creel's home number. When the screen lit, after a long wait, Creel looked like something that had climbed out of the paleozoic swamps a little behind schedule and had lain all day on the mud banks trying to decide whether it could grow legs fast enough to survive.

"Remind me not to call you in the middle of the night," Timothy said. "I just ruined my breakfast."

Creel grinned. His features firmed up when he saw who was phoning, and he looked halfway human again. "What is it?" he asked, the words distorted by a yawn he could not quite stifle.

"Have you ever heard of a company called Weapons Psionic?"

"Bad," Creel said, making a face.

"What about them?"

"We have a story concerning them tomorrow. You heard the name Wallengrine?"

"Sounds familiar."

"Herbert Wallengrine was heir to the Wallengrine plastics fortune, twenty-seven years old. His father died eight months ago, and the will was settled four months later. Seven hundred million involved. Herbert Wallengrine was killed by one of these robotic assassins—attacked his grav-car while it was in flight, destroyed the engine. But when it couldn't get at the grav-plates through the heavy armoring, it smashed through the windscreen, slammed into his chest, and self-destructed. They've arrested his wife on suspicion, but she knows as well as they do that—even if it was her—they'll never prove it. She stood to inherit every dime of the seven hundred million. Besides that, it was well known she had taken on a lover and that Wallengrine was planning a divorce on grounds of unsanctioned adultery, cutting her off without a penny." He paused. "We're using it on page two."

"Do we have any contacts who could dismantle one of these machines?"

Creel examined Timothy's image carefully. "You have one?"

"Let's say my question is academic. Do we know a good electronics man who might be able to handle it?"

"Lambertson," Creel said. "We've used him on a few things before, to take apart bombs so we could get an exclusive on the story."

"Can you get in touch with him now?"

Creel shrugged. "I will. Whether he'll come or not is up to him, of course. But with the money we can offer and the word that this is a SAM he has at his disposal, he'll probably jump at the chance."

"SAM?" Timothy asked. It was the first time he had heard its name.

"Selective Assassination Module," Creel said. "You didn't buy it, then?"

"No, George."

"It didn't get sent to you, did it?" he asked, his dark face growing even darker.

"Yes."

"That's bad," Creel said. "My, that is bad."

They said goodnight and broke the connection almost simultaneously.

Walter Lambertson was a huge, heavily muscled man with a lumbering walk and a face flushed by too many years of drinking. He carried a large toolbox and met Timothy by the patio doors after laboriously climbing out of the grav-car which seemed half again too small for him. "That's where it got in, eh?" he asked, his voice a gruff rumble. He did not even bother with introductions but proceeded right to business. Timothy decided the world could not be totally insane if heroically proportioned men like Lambertson still strode the earth.

Timothy took him into the library, where the big man expressed surprise at the size of the killer. "You've got one of the biggest I've ever seen," he said. "Must have one hell of a lot of guts to it." He listened to Timothy's story while he unpacked his tools. There were dozens of pieces of equipment in the box, most of them no larger than a man's hand with working ends so minute that the purpose of them was un-

fathomable. "I'm afraid you'll have to leave," Lambertson said when he had everything arranged on squares of white felt. "It's damn hard work, and it can't bear distractions. Sorry."

Ti nodded; he waited until Lambertson grasped the SAM, and then left the room with his servos trailing behind. He shut the door and continued into the living room, where he made himself a stiff drink and sat down to wait.

He realized, halfway through the drink, that the hatred which had dissipated in him had begun to flower again. It was not a hatred for the men of the Brethren so much as hatred for their attitudes, their outlooks and visions. Why couldn't men just leave each other alone? Why was it necessary to fight and kill and always resort to violence before thought?

When he finished the drink, hatred alive and well now, another grav-car came in over the trees and settled onto the patio beside Lambertson's vehicle. For a moment he tensed, wondering if this were the Brethren follow-up team checking on the success of the SAM. Then he saw Creel's face as the man walked into the patio lights, and he relaxed.

"I tried to get to sleep," Creel said as Ti met him at the door. "But I couldn't manage it, knowing what was happening over here. Where is he?"

Ti motioned toward the library and explained that Lambertson required privacy for the operation. Briefly he recounted the events of the night to Creel. As he was finishing, Lambertson opened the library door and called to them. He had cracked the nut and dissected the meat of the machine in a little under two hours.

In the library, the floor was littered with parts of machinery, all quite small and intricately formed. Lambertson had laid things out in rows, each row representing a weapons system. "What was in it?" Ti asked.

"This was the dart system," Lambertson said, pointing to a line of parts. "I was very careful not to touch the tips of the pins. They were discolored an odd green-blue—tipped with something worse than narcotics. This," he continued, pointing to a second conglomeration of pieces, "was a flame gun com-

plete with a bulb of napalm. It would never last very long; only good for short bursts. But that's all that is necessary with something as nasty as that."

"This?" Timothy asked.

"Laser," Lambertson said. "A cell containing energy enough for approximately five three-second blasts."

"And this?"

"Projectile weapon. Shoots twenty-two-caliber slugs with explosive tips. Fourteen rounds contained in this barrel mechanism which revolved to spit each slug into the firing nozzle." Even Lambertson's rugged features were creased with distaste as he catalogued the killing devices.

"And here," he went on, now professionally enthusiastic over what he had found, "we have a gas grenade launcher with two grenades: these. Each no larger than a grape, but enough gas, poisonous or not, to blanket a room in seconds."

"So they built five weapons systems, all to get me," Timothy said.

"Six," Lambertson corrected. He picked up a blocky part with a number of wires issuing from it. "This is a pack of highly compressed black powder. All it needed was an electric shock. If you hadn't shut down the SAM when you did, it might very well have used this last resort and destroyed the house." Lambertson waited for the news to sink in. Then: "Who do you know who would go to this expense and trouble to get you?" He cocked his head like a huge, quizzical Saint Bernard.

"I don't know," Ti said. "I had thought the Brethren. But I can't come up with a believable, sensible motive."

"I know a motive," Creel said. "It was something I was going to tell you tomorrow and didn't get to tell you on the comscreen earlier. Just found out about it today. The Brethren did this—I'll guarantee it. The motive was revenge. The spot you made available in the Brethren hierarchy by killing Klaus Margle was filled by his brother, Jon."

"I see," Timothy said, looking at the dismantled SAM again. "I see what you mean."

CHAPTER 6

In the foyer of the apartment complex, Timothy found her name, POLLY LONDON, embossed in heavy gold lettering against a black velvet nameplate. He pressed the call button beneath her comscreen and drifted back a foot or two to give the person who answered a full view of him and not just a picture of his nose. The screen lighted with an abstract black and moss-green pattern that shifted and changed in a hundred ways to delight the eyes, sensuous and rhythmic as the colors kept time to soft semiclassical music in the background. Over all of this came a well-modulated voice which had the sound of exceedingly fine breeding; of course, it was nothing more than a computer structuring sentences from a tape storage unit—Polly London was wealthy enough to be able to dispense with human servants. The voice asked, "Who is calling, please?"

"Timothy," he said. "Of *Enterstat*," he added in belated clarification. "I have an appointment for two o'clock."

There was a pause as the computer checked out that assertion. Crimson and yellow explosions burst across the screen. Then the computer said, "Would you please touch your fingers to the identification plate below the comscreen so that your prints may be checked with your records in the city computer?"

"I have no hands," Ti said, amused by the machine's lack of data. "Can't you make visual confirmation against my description in central files?"

"Highly unusual," the computer said.

"But I have no hands."

The colors vanished from the screen, were replaced with humming whiteness as the computer used its own visual scanners to examine him. The colors returned in a minute. "You may have admittance."

"Thank you."

To his left, a blue and silver abstract mural slid away, revealing an elevator entrance. Inside, he was not required to push a button or pull a lever for her floor. Her private computer secretary and odd-jobber now controlled the rising cage. Indeed, it was likely that no one but Polly London and the building superintendent knew which floor was hers. With individualized computer butlers like this, all anyone living here would need as an address was Cochran Towers West. The ultimate in privacy . . .

From the elevator, the computer directed him, in soft tones issuing from wall speakers along the way, down a corridor carpeted in brown-black carpet much like fur. The walls were richly paneled in teak and indented every forty feet where an apartment door lead off the common hall. The doors were not uniform in design, though each managed to fit tastefully with the decor of the hall—if one considered ornateness tasteful. Polly London's door was nordic in design, a heavy slab of wood that seemed ancient, though the weathering had probably all been done by hand in a week. The border was a fresco of Viking faces, helmets, ships, costumes, and words. In the center of the door was a heavy iron knocker. The fingerprint lock identification circle was concealed in the design of a fighting ship under full sail. There was, of course, no handle; if the door refused to open to your prints, then you were not authorized entrance anyway.

The door began to roll open under the power of a rollamite device that could handle its two or three hundred pounds

with ease. "This way," the nether-world voice of the computer said. "To your right."

He went down a long hallway, turned to his right through an arch, and floated into a plushly furnished room whose walls were a mixture of natural rock and teak wood, blending in and out so smoothly and repeatedly that he felt certain his eyes must be deceiving him. To his left, a waterfall meandered down a section of the wall that was stone and had been thrust into the chamber in descending steps. The water splashed into a pool where live flowers floated over multicolored stones that radiated upward through the pool as if they were precious gems. The floor was as thickly carpeted as the hall. The furniture—great, marshmallow-like beige pieces that looked enormously comfortable and resembled mushrooms growing lazily out of the floor—was broken by stone end tables and storage units. Sitting in one of these beige mushrooms, next to a stone table, was the most beautiful woman Timothy had ever seen . . .

She was tall, but that only meant her legs were marvelously long and sensual. Her figure, in all areas, was perfect, with a narrow waist and full, upthrust breasts. Her face was angelic, but not so perfect as to be sterile. Her nose was almost too pert, small and upturned. Her eyes were wide-set but lovely, a startling shade of green that reminded him of seawater or lime candy. Her buttery yellow hair framed her face, ended teasingly at the points of her breasts where they pushed against the fabric of her dress.

None of the hundreds of pictures he had seen of her had done her justice. She had a childlike grace and beauty combined with the sensuality of a grown woman, a quality photographs could never convey. He was glad that his withered organs were indicative of a withered interest. He had never been aroused by a woman; that was fortunate, for he could not have borne normal desires trapped as he was in this hideous shell of his. Still, though there was no desire there was—at times, rare and easily forgotten—a deep-seated yearning for something he could not name, a yearning that made him feel cold and hollow. He had that feeling now. He

only got it around especially sensual women, exceptionally stunning in all aspects. He felt hollow and unfulfilled. His skin grew clammy, and his throat was so dry that it ached.

She motioned him to the chair across from her. "This is an honor. I usually get interviewed by your reporters." She was charming, with a light and airy quality that did not give evidence of the uneasiness she felt, of the slight disgust that his appearance had aroused in her.

As he settled into a mushroom chair and turned off his grav-plates, he assured her it was his pleasure, not hers. She showed him how to order a drink from the console beside the chair, and in a minute he had a screwdriver. He sipped his drink and was thankful for the taste of vodka and orange juice.

"I'm more than a little curious," she said, leaning toward him. She spoke almost musically. "I can't understand what sort of special article you want to do that would require your own participation."

"I lied to you," he said quite bluntly. He knew he must speak faster and more directly than he had planned, for he would find himself liking her too much too soon. There was that childlike directness that transcended sexuality, and she could use that alone to wrap men around her long, well-manicured fingers.

"Lied?" she asked, not comprehending, as if no one had ever done such a thing with her before. And perhaps this was so. Lying to this woman would require the same sort of bully villainism that motivated a selfish teenager to tell a younger brother that Santa Claus was a hoax.

"I'm not here to do an article for the paper," he said. "It was the only excuse that would get me in here to see you."

She frowned, still not able to grasp the purpose of sneaking in to her house under false pretenses.

"I don't wish you harm. I need a favor of you."

She started to rise, but he motioned her down. She looked a bit agitated, and her reaction was almost childish—though he felt that she was incapable of anything more than childlike anger. It was not that she was mentally immature—just that

she had never experienced the nastiness of the world as he had, had never needed to build up a thick skin and a nastiness of her own. "This is my house," she said. "Are you trying to tell me what I can and can't do in my own house?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "But if you rise, I'll have to turn on my grav-plates and rise as well to be sure you don't try to call for help—which would be foolish since I don't wish to harm you. And since I would merely tell the police I was here for an interview and show them the notes I've made. I'd pretend you were a headline hunter."

"Notes? But—"

"I made them beforehand. Just for such an eventuality as this."

She smiled again. "You are clever, aren't you?"

"I like to think so, yes."

"Well, what is this favor?" She leaned back, sipped her own drink, her anger totally abated.

He hoped she would never meet someone who would be too sharp and cold to be won over by her charm and innocence. The proper sort of sadist could bring her world down in a day, could break and ruin her without half trying. It might have been nice to have been raised in a world where evil had not existed—but it could also be deadly never to have formed the proper methods to cope with enemies.

"You dated the late Klaus Margle, didn't you?" he asked.

He thought he saw her eyes get a little glassy, as if she were holding back tears. When she spoke, there was a tremble in her voice. This amazed him when he considered the Klaus Margle he knew, a man without scruples or morals, willing to kill when the need arose. He supposed that it was possible that there was a totally different side to the man, though such a realization surprised him. He was relieved that the papers had not reported how Margle had died, and that the actual shootout was implied to be the doing of the police. "I did," she said. "I went with him for a good while. He was like a little boy around me. Very gentlemanly. I just don't believe all these things in the papers."

"They're true," he said as gently as he could.

"So you say."

It was impossible to get angry at her, but he could feel anger at her almost cultured blindness to reality. He held his reaction in check and said, "His brother is trying to kill me."

Surprisingly, her response to this was not as naive as her comment about Klaus. "I don't like Jon," she said. "Klaus you could always have fun with. He enjoyed life. I never saw Jon smile. I think he would have liked to take me away from Klaus. But he frightened me a little."

"I want to get Jon Margle before he gets me," he said.

Her face went sickeningly pale, and she took a long sip of her drink.

He realized what had terrified her, and he attempted to explain what he meant. "I don't mean kill him. I just want to get him, for the police. If they want to execute him, they can. Or put him away for life. But I have to find some way to get something on him, or I won't have peace of mind."

She ordered another drink, took the plastic bulb out of the receival tray, broke it and poured the contents into her glass. "I don't understand what you want of me," she said, her hands trembling.

"You must know other people in the Brethren."

"No," she said, clearly meaning it.

Her answer unsettled him for a moment, and then he realized how ignorant she might have been of Klaus Margle's other self. "You know some of his close friends?"

"Yes, but they aren't—"

"Let me decide what they are and aren't," he said. "I want you to think very carefully about Klaus's friends. Was there any one of them who disliked his brother?"

"Many," she said.

"Good. But think about them and come up with the one who liked Jon the least. Maybe someone who was terrified of him. Or contemptuous. Someone who would not like working under him."

"I don't have to do any of this," she said, genuine anguish in her voice. "Why should I even sit here and listen to you tell me Klaus and his friends were gangsters?"

"Because they were," he said. "And if you don't cooperate on this little thing I want, I'll use the voice of *Enterstat* to discredit you, to ruin your career."

"Impossible!" she said, looking up, defiant. She was a good actress, and she knew it.

"Not if I lie," he said. "We'll fake evidence and write atrocious lies. And sure, you'll take us to court. But by then you'll be ruined. And even if you get a million or so in settlement, it can be absorbed by *Enterstat*—not easily, I admit, but without ruining me. And I think you much prefer the art of acting to the money it makes for you. You are primarily an actress, not a moneymaker. Being blackballed from senso-films would hurt emotionally, not financially." He saw that she believed him, but that she could hardly accept that anyone would be this cruel to her—or to anyone, for that matter. He had cracked her naivete, and he was not exactly pleased with himself. "It's my life," he said in a way of explanation and justification for his crudity.

"I think I know the man you need," she said.

"When can I get in touch with him?" He was not happy with the way she slumped now, with the way he had broken her spirit.

"I can't just go phone him, if Jon is as deadly as people say. It will have to be—discreet."

"Tomorrow," he said. "Make an excuse to see him if you must. But I can't wait longer than tomorrow. I might be dead if you don't help me soon." He laid a card with his comscreen number on it on the coffee table. "Call me as soon as it's arranged."

"Tomorrow," she said dismally.

He felt terrible. The yearning and the hollowness in him had been augmented now by a feeling of brutishness, of insensitivity. But, damn it, this was the only way to reach the girl, and through her was the only way to reach someone within the Brethren structure who might be willing, for the proper consideration, to turn over information that would send Jon Margle up the river. "Tell him the money is unlimited. Almost any price he names within reason."

He found his own way out. It seemed like several thousand miles . . .

Almost twenty-four hours later to the minute, in the middle of Wednesday afternoon, she called him. Her face, larger than life on the comscreen, was painfully beautiful, though in no way as fascinating as it had been in person. She avoided his eye, staring at points beyond him in the room, staring down at her own hands which—he thought—twitched and intertwined in her lap. She spoke softly, almost inaudibly, like a small, embarrassed child. He could not understand this. Had she been frightened, he could have reasoned why. But embarrassment? “In an hour,” she said. “My place again.”

“I’m afraid not,” he countered, wishing that she would look him in the eyes just once so that he could see that marvelous, shimmering sea-green once again. “That could be too easy a trap. It has to be someplace public.”

She seemed confused, but then she flipped her long yellow hair out of her face and said, “Huzzah Amusement Park,” as if the informer was sitting beside her, giving her instructions out of camera range. “Around the—around the fountain. Where they throw coins and make wishes. An hour.”

“I’ll be there,” he assured her.

She rang off, blanking the screen, though he stared at it for some minutes longer, retaining a vision of buttery hair, tan skin, and a quick flash of green . . .

Timothy was oblivious to the stares he elicited as he entered the amusement park. He had long ago learned to live with the attention he drew, ignore it and rise above it. The sign of an ignorant and tasteless man, Taguster had once told him, was the tendency to stare at someone else who was different, whether they were abnormal in form or only in the clothing they chose to wear.

A number of people stood at the mammoth pool into which the fountain emptied its water and drew more to spout. They tossed coins into the blue water, trailed hands in the coolness of it. Then he caught sight of Polly London. She was wearing

a relatively expensive pants suit and a large and floppy hat with great, round sunglasses. Her hair was black—she was wearing a wig—but even that change in coloration could not camouflage her beauty. She seemed, in fact, even more stunning than before.

"He's around the fountain," she said. "It's not so public on the other side."

"Let's go," he said.

The pool had a diameter of two hundred feet, and to walk around its circumference required a good deal of nudging, jostling and—in Polly's case—trampled feet. In a few minutes, they broke out of the worst of the crowd, through scattered tourists, to the far back of the pool where the bench that rimmed it looked out onto woods and was screened from the other side by the rock tower of the fountain and the huge spray of water. Here there was only one couple, arms around each other, watching the rise of the water, and a small, thin, intense man in a dark suit. He rose as they approached, then sat down when Polly did. Ti hovered before them, very close so that whatever was said could be kept from the ears of the young lovers.

Introductions were made, and Ti discovered the man was Mr. Kealy; he thought it likely this name was a cover identity. The thin man was nervous, looking about as if he expected someone to jump from one of the trees. "I doubt your friends would be here," Ti said, trying to reassure the man. "It's hardly their form of entertainment."

Kealy nodded, looked at Polly; their eyes locked a short moment. She seemed to wince, and Timothy wondered what the two of them had just exchanged without benefit of words. "Timothy," Polly said, drawing his attention to her lovely face. "Mr. Kealy wants to talk money first. He—" She abruptly stopped talking, raising a tightly clenched fist from her lap toward her mouth, and the look on her face gave Timothy almost enough warning.

He whirled as Kealy slipped the hypodermic syringe into his hip, just above the silver cap of his mobility system. Had it been a narcodart, he might still have had time to deflect it.

But it had all the force of the small man's arm behind it—and was therefore unmoved by the ESP talent.

Kealy depressed the syringe plunger; icewater flushed into Ti's hip.

He wanted to scream.

And he wondered if it were too late to bother . . .

CHAPTER 7

His body was no longer a smoothly functioning machine, but twitched and shivered as the drug flushed through it. He felt strangely hot and cold at the same time. He fancied he could even feel his blood surging through the tight walls of his veins and arteries; it was icy, nearly frozen, and the flesh it moved through was dry and hot as if it had been baked in an oven. His facial features seemed numb and twisted so that his countenance must have been more horrible than usual. He knew, if he had had feet and hands, those limbs would have been immobile, useless, semi-paralyzed as was his face.

He tried to ask them what they had done to him.

The words would not come; there seemed to be fingers around his throat, crushing it shut . . .

Kealy rose, gripped him, and began to turn him around, away from the fountain. Ti tried desperately to order his servos to attack the little man, but the artificial hands just floated to either side of him, locked to their "hold" pattern. They would go wherever his grav-ball went, but would not follow his directions. Then he tried to flip switches inside his grav-plate mechanism, to make it lift up and up, to its limit of eighty feet, up where they couldn't touch him. But there was no response from the ball when he tried this.

It was then that he realized they had given him something that blanked out his psionic ability . . .

He was helpless as he had not been since he had left that hospital and had been educated by the weapons-hungry generals. He wanted to scream and kick and shout and swing his servos, not so much to attack those who had done this to him, but to work off some of the energy of terror that adrenalin was pumping through his twisted hulk.

Kealy turned him completely about and started pushing him toward the trees. Ahead, the young couple stood, watching them. Ti wanted to shout, cry out, scream at them for help. He concentrated on saying something, anything that would clue them in to what was happening. He stopped resisting with his body, stopped trying to control the grav-plate mechanism, stopped trying to use his servos. With every ounce of strength in him, he managed to shatter the drug's control long enough to issue a weak cry for help.

The young couple came forward, grabbed hold of him, and for a moment he was set to rejoice.

Then Kealy let go of him, hurried ahead toward the woods, and said to the young couple: "Make it fast before anyone comes around from the other side of the pool."

The sweet kids propelled him toward the trees and into the forest, moving quickly along a footpath that twisted and wound. Soon they were out of sight of the fountain and the midway and anyone who might possibly help him.

The footpath ended at a small lane along which a darkly painted grav-car rested on its rubber rim. When Kealy opened the door, the girl and boy muscled him into the backseat, arranging themselves on either side of him, fencing him in and keeping anyone outside from looking through the windows and getting a good look at him.

Kealy and Polly London sat up front, the dark man behind the wheel. In a moment, they lifted and hummed down the dirt path, the trees flashing swiftly by on all sides. Reluctantly, Polly turned and looked at him, her face lined and tired, as if she had been up all night. "Don't be scared," she said.

He wanted to scream at her.

He could not.

"Don't be frightened. Really. It's nothing that can hurt you

very badly. It's only PBT. They aren't going to kill you. You might have a few bad delusions, since it was a massive dose, but that's the worst of it. Do you believe me?"

He did not respond. She could not know that the PBT had paralyzed that section of his brain that gave him his psionic ability—and that without his ESP he was not a man, not anything but a helpless, useless hulk. She could never conceive of how terrified that made him. Without his ESP, he might just as well be dead.

Kealy took the car onto a main highway, punched out to traffic control for an upper level pathway, received one, and took the craft soaring into the perfectly cloudless blue day.

As they rose, the PBT illusions struck Ti with the force of a hammer blow and catapulted him from the real world into a never-never land of surreal fantasies which he could taste and touch and smell and feel . . .

There were women, at first, an abundance of them that made the dreams good and thrilling. In the dream, he drifted down a river of wine on a grass mat that was cool and green. He had arms and legs just as any normal man, had a face that was not twisted and perverted but wonderfully handsome. He was whole, and the world was perfect. As he progressed down the winding waterway, dipping his hands into the fluid to obtain sweet refreshing drinks, the women began to descend from the lightly clouded sky. At first, they were leaves on the wind, nothing more than bits of autumn scattered by a breeze. Then each of the leaves underwent a metamorphosis.

The first to approach his raft was a hugely breasted, long-legged blonde who looked strikingly like Polly London. She circled over him, lighter than air, then sank onto the raft with him. She was naked, and her tanned flesh quivered enticingly before him.

He touched her: his hands sang along her flesh as they picked up the subtle harmony of her warm body.

He kissed her: and felt for the first time the sweet commingling of tongue and tongue . . .

He made love to her as the wine bubbled against the rocks on either shore.

Then other women drifted down, changing from leaves

into stunningly attractive bedmates who came to him willingly, hungrily. The world was flesh and to hell with the devil. Every piece of the world, from the grass of the raft to the air itself was sensual in touch and smell and taste.

Then the women began to change . . .

Their arms stretched into wings, leathery appendages that spread around the raft, blocking out the sunlight. Their lushness gave way to a bony toughness; their beauty rapidly withered into an ugliness that sparked some unspeakable horror in him. Their faces became long, wolflike, their eyes sunken beneath shelves of bone. Their mouths split wide and were crammed with razor-edged teeth that glittered yellowly.

He screamed, tried to rise up; they fell upon him, ripping and tearing . . .

It was a night of ugly dreams interspersed with short stretches of sound, deep sleep in which his body attempted to recover from the spasms that shook it while awake—and during which his mind fought to gain a hold on sanity after the mad visions that fled through it in moments of wakefulness.

Dark things chased him down long corridors, things that loped and gibbered, things that had blood-reddened eyes and howled eerily in the confines of the stone-walled hallways. Some of them flew, and some of them crawled along the walls like spiders, amber eyes flashing and hair-feathered limbs trembling in anticipation of the moment when they would leap upon him. In one of these nightmares, as he was running from a slaving, featureless creature that groaned like a man and yet very much unlike a man, one of his legs began to dissolve under him. In moments, he was hobbling on a single leg—when that disappeared and he crashed to the floor. He tried crawling, but both arms vanished. Helplessly immobile, the smell of the slimed floor in his nostrils, he listened to the faceless beast gibbering and chuckling insanely as it approached him at its leisure . . .

He woke from that dream screaming louder than ever, his throat cracking and sore, trickling blood down to his stomach from dry, rasped membranes.

He dreamed the same thing several times, always waking

into another drug "reality" of a different nature just before the beast pounced. The dream following might be horrible in its own right, but it offered some degree of succor before he had to repeat that worst one again.

Finally, only two hours before dawn, better than half a day since the delusions had begun in the grav-car on the way from the amusement park, the dreams ceased abruptly, leaving him dizzy, exhausted, and nauseated. With his senses at least partially restored, he found he floated above a bed, his servos swaying back and forth before him. He reached into the ball of the grav-plate system, shut it down, and dropped to the soft mattress where he found instant and protracted sleep of the same deep nature of the transitory moments of rest he had gotten throughout the ordeal. It never once became clear to him that his psi power had returned.

Some five hours later he was awakened by something prodding his neck, something blunt and cold. For a moment, he was afraid to open his eye for fear that one of the creatures from the drug-delusions would be kneeling next to him, poking him with its snout, its teeth gleaming wickedly in a demonic smile. But the prodding grew harder and more insistent until he decided it would be worse not knowing what manner of creature this was than opening his eye and coming face-to-face with it. But his eye was gummed with sleep, and he had to blink it several times to be able to see clearly.

"Good morning, sleeping beauty," a heavy voice said.

He looked up into a heavily jowled face that bore the scars of a number of fights that had not been waged in friendly camaraderie. His eyes were small and squinting, and they were veiled with the dull sheen of dimwittedness. This man was not a drug-delusion, but he might be far more dangerous than a snouted demon if he were turned loose on anyone.

"You've judged him correctly," a smooth, well-modulated voice said, a voice that spoke of education, of self-assurance that transcended mere ego.

Timothy shifted his gaze to the right, behind the brute, and saw a tall, slender man in his mid-thirties: lots of dark hair combed over his ears, a square lantern-jawed face, im-

peccable clothes dark and sharply cut. In short, this was a man of authority, not a muscleman.

"He likes to hurt people," the gentleman said. "Name's Baker. He doesn't like films and books, as you and I might. He prefers physical excitement."

"You've scared me," Ti said. He was being perfectly honest. "You can stop now."

"Good," the gentleman said, smiling and rocking a little on his heels.

Baker held the projectile gun, slapping it from one palm to another, grinning. Timothy was not certain whether the man had been born with a low IQ and little interest in anything but violence, or whether the Brethren had taken a healthy man and done this to him. Such things were possible. The military had experimented with brain operations in which a man's interests in life were restricted to obeying authority and conforming to the norm—and killing. Such men made magnificent soldiers. And the Brethren would certainly have access to those surgical techniques, considering the money available to them with which they could bribe surgeons or researchists associated with the project.

"What do you want with me?" Timothy asked the gentlemanly one.

"Out of our hair. You made a mistake going to Miss London for this. She just has no concept of how to be devious. Sure, Kealy hates me, but he fears me more. There were other men who would have sold me out. You have to be taken care of so you won't find one of them next time."

At first Ti was intensely pleased at the implication that they were not going to kill him. Then he realized that they would forgo that alternative only if Jon Margle had come up with something even more frightening. "You're not killing me?" he asked, hoping he would hear the alternative now, would not have to lie here and wonder about it.

"That was the original intention. But you seem adept at thwarting the most sophisticated techniques. And if we were to kill you here, we might be implicated. The only other possibility is to addict you to PBT."

Instantly, Ti flicked on his grav-plates and sent a servo

streaking at the gentleman. Baker rammed a fist into Ti's chest. He crashed backward against the wall, banging his head on the windowsill set high in the partition. The servo stopped a dozen feet from the Brother as Timothy forgot about controlling it and fought to maintain consciousness.

"Foolish," the Brother said. "You won't be given a killing addiction. With some people, we've put them on it until they need it in massive doses and their bodies begin to deteriorate. It's a slow and painful way to go. But you don't have to fear that."

Ti hung over the bed, drifting, trying to regain his wits and think of some way out of this. Addiction to PBT meant a loss of his ESP and a return to the helplessness of his childhood. Inside, he was screaming . . .

"Not as light doses as your friend Taguster took, though. Somewhere in between, so you won't run to the police to swap information for legalized status as an addict. Now and then, we'll hold out until you're screaming for it—just to keep you aware of who is master here."

Timothy shot toward the ceiling, turning on his side in the same maneuver. He directed the silver ball of his mobility system across the room, toward the open door. But though Baker looked stupid and slow, he was faster than any of them; he reached the door a second before Ti, slamming and locking it, grasping the old-fashioned key in his hand.

Ti hit him full force with the silver mobility cap, smashing him backward against the wall, cracking his head. Baker slid to the floor, unconscious. The key dropped from his hand and made a ringing noise on the stone floor. As Ti picked it up with a servo, the gentleman called from behind in a calm voice, "Stop right there, or you're dead."

Ti directed the servo to put the key in the lock and continue opening the door.

"A knife is too heavy for your psionic power to deflect, you know."

Timothy turned, looked at the garishly decorated throwing knife the Brother held in his right palm. He seemed to know how to use it.

"Throw me the key," the Brother said. When Ti hesitated, he drew his arm back for the throw.

Ti plucked the key from the lock and threw it to the Brother. It landed at the man's feet, and he did not stoop to retrieve it. Timothy was angry for even considering such a simple trick would work. It would only make the man more observant of future movements.

"Return to your bed, please," the gentleman said.

Ti obliged. There was little else he could do. Addiction to the drug might be worse than death, but if he died now there was no chance of ever escaping; he would be forfeiting the future and any better opportunities that might arise. He shut off his mobility system at the Brother's suggestion and sank onto the mattress; now he was in the thrall of gravity.

"I believe," the gentleman said, "that you may even be the type to cooperate with police after you become a medium-range addict. But that would be folly. In the event you do manage to destroy the Brethren, you gain nothing. They could supply you with the confiscated stores of the drug, but they would soon run out of those. And only we know where it comes from. You understand? No one else will ever be able to synthesize it—or even come close. We are the only source. When we go, so does that source. And then you would find yourself with a craving you couldn't fill—one that would become quite deadly in time. I think you see the wisdom here, no?"

Timothy said nothing.

Against the far wall, Baker stirred, then pushed groggily to his feet. A small amount of blood ran out his nose, but he seemed otherwise unscathed. When he had his feet properly under him, he charged Ti.

"Baker!" the gentleman shouted.

The brute stopped and stood glowering at Timothy. Because of the way he had obeyed his master, Ti knew he was a surgically altered man. For the first time, he felt a bit pleased that the Army had indulged in such debased and inhumane research . . .

The gentleman approached with a hypodermic case he had withdrawn from his inside coat pocket. He sat on the edge of

Ti's bed while he filled the measured tube from a bottle of amber fluid. He found a vein on Timothy's hip, stabbed the needle in, drained the tube, and put the instruments away again. "That should be taking effect shortly," he said, getting to his feet.

Timothy felt his psi talent slipping away just as before, though this dose was not so massive as to deny him speaking powers. "I won't let you do this to me," he said. He wanted to scream about the inhumanity of taking away his third hand, for that was equal to dismembering a healthy man. But he thought it might be better to remain silent about the loss of his ESP. If Baker or others like him realized the mutant was totally helpless, there was little chance of his escaping repeated beatings.

"You have little choice," the gentleman said. "We'll be around twice a day. I'll administer these myself. I'd call it sweet revenge, but it's chiefly to please those in the organization who were close to Klaus, to keep them content."

"Revenge?" he asked. In his mind there was a ghost river, a grass raft, and drifting autumn leaves . . .

"What else?" the gentleman asked.

He was no longer grinning.

There was a river of wine, wine, wine . . .

"I don't understand," Timothy said with an effort, trying to hold on to the concrete reality here before the ethereal illusions swept him away into drunken, chaotic madness . . .

"Of course you do," the gentleman said. "My name is Jon Margle."

Ti fell down into the surging wine river . . .

CHAPTER 8

Ti had no more nightmares under the PBT, for they were no longer giving him the massive doses that Kealy had used in the amusement park. Instead, he coasted through illusions of a heavy, sensual nature, through idyllic paradises from which he hated more and more to be withdrawn when the drug began to lose its influence on his mind. When he was clearheaded and had none of the stuff in him, he realized that his delight in the dreams meant he was losing hold of reality. He was accepting fantasy for experience, and that horrified him. He was quite aware that he yearned for the dreams because they were the only way he could ever know sexuality; they were an entire world he had never envisioned or expected to experience. But this alone, he argued, was no reason to give in to them. His life had been built on battles, and: if he were to lose one to a mere chemical substance when he had won so many against tough human adversaries, it was all a sham.

Yet he did give in to them. Again and again.

And when he did not have the drug, he found himself often lying listlessly on his bed, wishing they would hurry with the next dose.

And then he would know fear . . .

On the third morning in the house, Margle and Baker broke the routine when they brought his dose. He was not

surprised when he realized he was about to get a beating from Baker. Nothing Jon Margle could do would surprise him now. He knew the man for what he was—a coward and a sadist. And that was the deadliest of all combinations. Klaus Margle had a limit to what he would order a man to do. Because he had been a brave man, he would not have a man perform that which he feared himself. But in his cowardice, there was no limit to what Jon Margle would ask of Baker. He could not instill fear in his Brethren subordinates through his own personality, but he could create a proxy fear by making them understand that his own dementia had no limits, that his own sadism could request and enjoy anything.

“Baker brought up an interesting point,” Margle said. “Addiction may eventually burden you, but you are getting off lightly now—even enjoying yourself, not suffering at all for Brother Klaus’s murder. Baker said it less fluently, of course, but he made sense.”

Baker laughed unpleasantly.

“So Baker wonders why we don’t make you suffer now instead of letting you enjoy the PBT without a counterbalancing discipline. I tend to think he has a point. Besides, he needs a workout.”

Timothy rose on his grav-plate system, terrified—but he balanced that terror with hate, which he had found it prudent to begin cultivating again.

“Yes, yes!” Margle said almost gleefully. “Fight like hell! It will be interesting to see what Baker can withstand when he has a grudge driving him.”

The quasi-neanderthal moved in with uncanny swiftness and delivered a jab to Timothy’s neck that left the mutant gagging and gasping for air, his throat afire.

“Open-hand blows, Baker,” Margle ordered the henchman. “He may be as freaky inside as outside, and we don’t want a corpse this time.”

Baker grunted acknowledgment and angled for another blow. He swung his beefy hands and slapped Ti’s head several times until Timothy heard bells in his ears and his eye refused to focus.

Ti twisted his body and shot forth with his mobility ball

ahead of him. He caught Baker on the side, spinning him around. Baker snapped his head against the paneling, looked groggy for a moment. But the giant's quest for revenge was stronger than his body's urge to pass out, and he rose, staggered toward Ti, and swung a heavy fist that barely missed the mutant's face.

Ti rolled onto his side again, accelerated, and rushed the brute. This time Baker leaped sideways. Ti skimmed past him, sliding noisily along the wall, his metal mobility cap rattling and clanging like a bell with a broken clapper. When he turned, Baker was on him, punching and stabbing with open hands at ribs and shoulders and face. Margle stood by the door, laughing . . .

Ti was relieved that, if the beating had to come, they had decided to give it to him before his dose of PBT. Otherwise, without his psionic power, he would have been helpless. He directed his mechanical hands to pummel the man's back, delivering excruciating batterings—though Baker seemed hardly to notice. He wouldn't. His pain centers had been pared to a minimum so that he would experience pain only in its extremes, thereby insuring he would not back out of a fight until it was necessary either to retreat or die. He continued to work on Timothy with an insane, rhythmic movement that made him seem more like an automaton than a human being, raising his flattened hands to slap the mutant's face until blood freely flowed down the misshapen chin.

Baker giggled, high and chillingly. His face was crimson, veins standing out, throbbing, sweat beading on his brow and running down his stubbled cheeks. He grinned fiercely, like a wolf before trapped prey. He was relentless and invincible, and Timothy was certain that the brute meant to kill him.

Still Jon Margle watched, intrigued. His eyes contained a touch of the inhuman mania that infected Baker. It was lacquered over with education and a veneer of civilization—but it was there just the same.

Aware that he had little time left before unconsciousness claimed him, Timothy attacked Baker's face with his steel servos. In moments, the man's bare soft facial flesh had begun to disintegrate beneath the worrying of the robotic prosthos.

There was a long gash down his left cheek, a bloody pulp where his right ear had been, a crimson horror where the servos had torn the flap of flesh separating his nostrils. Despite the pain, Baker did not slacken his attack on the mutant. He had flattened his hands automatically at Margle's order, but now they balled into fists as the romp changed into a matter of survival. Timothy hoped for an order from Margle to stop this, but he made no effort to restrain the killer. Margle's nostrils were flared, his eyes wild. He cringed by the door, obviously frightened and entranced at the same time.

And Timothy knew he could hold on to consciousness only a few moments longer. The pain of those blows in stomach and chest came like blocks of concrete tossed by a catapult.

Baker was chanting something, a string of obscenities mouthed in faithful order like a religious chant . . .

Ti now wished they had given him the PBT first, so that he would not have been aware of the pain. That thought jolted him awake again. Damn it, they had almost gotten to him so soon! When he began wishing for the drug, his will was snapped and they had won the battle. Furious with himself, he ordered the servos to grasp Baker's neck, to twist and crush the thickly muscled flesh until the man crumpled from a lack of blood to his brain. They locked hard fingers around his neck and applied heavy, though not maximum, pressure.

Baker continued to swing, though he slowly became aware that he was slowing down and that there was pain—very bad pain. He dropped his fists, staggered back, grasped at the servos worrying his neck. He pulled, fear and desperation replacing the sadistic frenzy that had occupied his facial features. But hands of flesh were not a match for steel fingers. He dropped to his knees and pitched forward into blackness.

Ti held the hands on him a moment more, then released them lest he kill the man. Without looking up, he directed the servos at the door where Margle had been waiting, hoping to catch the man off guard.

"Nice try," Margle said from behind him, near the bed. "But you better settle down now and let me get on with this."

Ti turned, discouraged, and saw the Brother holding the same ornate throwing knife he had used to cow the mutant

days earlier. The moment of hope that had flowered in him now withered and died, rotted down in the depths of him. He turned and went back to the bed, with his servos floating to either side. He weighed the possibility of using the servos to strangle Margle while the Brother injected the PBT, but he saw that the man had used the time of the fight to fill the needle and that he could easily inject it with one hand while maintaining a deadly grip on the knife. He lay down on the bed, turned off the grav-plate system as directed, and accepted the dose of the drug with what dignity he could muster.

Dignity, after all, was about all he had left. And even that would be gone soon; he might as well make use of it while it was permitted him.

"Much more reasonable," Margle said, putting the needle away.

The icewater of the drug stung through his veins.

"Enjoy yourself now."

Margle went into the bathroom, returned with a glass of water, pushed Baker onto his face by using the toe of his boot, and poured the cold fluid over the lackey's face. Baker spluttered, opened his eyes, tried to close them again and recapture blackness when he felt the awful pain in his throat.

"Come on, you great beast," Margle said, an amused expression on his face. "We've got things to do."

Baker rose without protest, cast a glance at Timothy, then followed Margle to the door. The Brother unlocked the portal, let them out, and closed and barred it behind them.

Ti was alone again, with only his dream . . .

For a while. Then the Other was there.

The drug delusions were still immensely pleasing. Indeed, the sensuality, the richness of color and texture seemed to grow with each dose that was administered to him, to gain depth and believability that sometimes seemed to surpass real experiences in a world of concrete objects. But a new element had intruded in the pattern that had become so familiar in such a short time. During both of the psychedelic experiences of the previous day, Ti's second day locked in the basement room of that house, the Other had appeared in the delusions,

standing nearby, a ghost, a shadow, the only flimsiness in this vivid world. The Other looked exactly like Ti imagined himself in the dreams, handsome and with full body. He was like a mirror image of the Dream Timothy, a second Dream Timothy whose only purpose seemed to be to watch. There was nothing sinister about him, nothing to raise alarm. Indeed, his presence served only to calm Timothy, to make the delusions more pleasant.

Both times, Dream Timothy had attempted to speak with the shadow image of himself. And both times the attempt had ended in failure. The ghost had faded, dissolved, evaporated on the warm breezes of that nether-world. Now, during his third appearance, he was closer than before, more solid than before, staring from the riverbank as Ti drifted down it with the naked maidens that always accompanied him on his raft (which had now become a full-sized cabin cruiser with both propeller screw drive and air-cushion speed equipment). Even as the cruiser progressed down the stream, the second Dream Timothy followed, floating along the earth, not walking.

Dream Timothy stood on the deck of his ship, flanked by the nubile women of substantial insubstantiality, leaned on the railing, gripping it. He called to the image of himself that drifted by the shore, asked what the Other wanted.

The image did not answer.

He called again, repeated his question. As he finished speaking, the shadow man raised farther off the bank and sailed outward across the water like a spirit of the dead, his arms outstretched to the more solid Dream Timothy. The specter should have been frightening, but it was not. Somehow, Dream Timothy yearned for the embrace of the supernatural figure, of this shred of unreality in a world so painfully perfect in detail.

The specter drew closer.

Dream Timothy leaned farther over the rail.

And the ghost struck him, passed into him . . .

. . . And he was awake, back in the cellar room of the Brethren house, lying on the bed. Before him, the table lamp floated free of any table, a great, heavy metal thing. Slowly,

cracks began to appear in the metal. The bulb shattered. The shade was flung into a thousand tiny pieces. And the bronze from which the thing was cast began to shred like paper, to peel away in shavings and pile at the foot of the bed. He watched it until it was almost totally destroyed . . .

. . . Then he felt the PBT nether-world encompass him again. He was sailing down a river with the naked maidens. The world was pleasant, warm, and filled with sensuality. There was absolutely no sign of the specter he had come to think of as the Other. It had passed into him—then through him. It had vanished as before. There had been but that one moment of commingling when their bodies had meshed in the same place at the same time. And then he had experienced the delusion of being awake and of shredding a piece of bronze with his psi power. But his psi power was far too limited for such a feat; it could not even have lifted such an object. He stopped thinking of that silliness and returned to the warmth of the girls who awaited him . . .

. . . But when he woke again, hours later, the last effects of the PBT washed from his system, he saw the ribbons of shaved bronze lying where they had fallen earlier, and he knew that he had not been dreaming this thing after all . . .

CHAPTER 9

That night, of course, was a sleepless one.

He circled that small, cozy cellar chamber a thousand times, his mind so occupied that he little cared that the scenery never changed. His thoughts required so much of his attention that, for short moments, he was even oblivious to the ache of Baker's vicious beating, to the throbbing pain of the cuts on his face and the tender gash in his lower lip. He was preoccupied with the other, that spectral vision from his PBT delusions, and what the thing meant to him. He had reached the conclusion that the other was only a second part of his personality, perhaps a part that had never been given dominance in the real world but which the drug was able to unleash through its workings in his brain.

And for that moment when Dream Timothy and the Other had merged, had become one individual, his psionic abilities had bloomed, flowered into something more than a parlor trick. He longed for morning to arrive, for Jon Margle and the hulking Baker to appear with the next injection. He *wanted* it now! But not for the illusions, not for the dreams and the feeling of high that had led him into apathy these first three days. He desired it now to go searching for the Other again, to find the ghost image of Dream Timothy, to find some way to make that intermingling of flesh last, to make it permanent.

Both Jon Margle and he had overlooked something that should have been considered before the PBT had been given to him. His body was human, yes, but it was nonhuman as well. His brain was obviously somehow special, or he would have had no psi power whatsoever. They should have seen that there was a strong possibility that the drug would not work on him in exactly the same manner it had worked on the tens of thousands of addicts the Brethren had created with it. Now he wondered whether it would have even remotely the same effect. He was beginning to believe that he might not become addicted at all—that it might, instead, free the psionic portion of his mind, develop his talent to the logical extreme, or at least increase it. If it could be permanently brought even to the level it had attained for a short moment this afternoon, he could easily break out of this prison, would no longer have a need to fear any weapon no matter whether it was a throwing knife or a tiny narcodart.

He hoped there would be no beating this time. He wanted to lie down, to be docile, to play the part of the converted user who just wants his junk and his subsequent high and is willing to play along with the opposition to get it.

The night passed in eons.

The darkness seemed eternal, deep, and unremitting, as it always does when one is waiting impatiently for morning.

Then the first light shone through the barred window, cresting the ridges and distant peaks of higher mountains, a fluid orange that became crimson, then red, and finally burst across the sky in yellow fingers.

When they finally arrived, some two hours after daybreak, they had Polly London with them. She was dissheveled, though still beautiful, and there was a bruise along the lovely line of her right jaw. She fell to her knees on the floor, dazed, gasping for breath like a landed fish.

"You've got a cell partner," Margle said. It was evident that both he and Baker had worked out a little of their sadistic nature on her—and that he had sampled the sensuality she was famous for on the senso-film screen.

"Why this?" Ti asked, suddenly miserable. He had been angered by her childlike inability to see evil in the world, but

he had not wanted to be a witness to her education in the ways of ugliness.

"She's a bleeding heart," Margle said. "Got very restless about you. Pities you. A little too much pity and restlessness to be trustworthy any longer."

"What are you going to do to her?" Timothy asked, giving her one of his servos to help her get to her feet.

"Addict her," Margle said. "Medium range, like you. Not only will she give up these childish attempts to go to the police, but she'll be a nice little piece of woman to have under one's thumb, don't you think?"

"You're sick," Ti said contemptuously.

"No, no," Margle said. "I'm perfectly healthy. I've never taken junk and never will. It's the two of you who are soon to be addicted, friend."

Margle ordered the girl onto the second bed in the room where he would give her her first dose. When she stood and refused—out of incomprehension of his ruthlessness more than out of bravery—he sighed and ordered Baker to man-handle her onto the mattress. She kicked at the brute's shins and struck him with her small and ineffective hands. She bit his fingers, making him howl in fury. At last he chopped her viciously alongside the neck, and took her weight as she collapsed against him. By the time she had regained her senses a few moments later, Jon Margle was slipping the PBT needle into her slim brown arm.

Timothy winced as the stuff disappeared from the syringe's glass tube.

Polly arched her back as the first taste of PBT brought her bad dreams rather than good ones. Ti was glad she had not had to suffer a massive dose as he had. She looked miserable, thrashing on the cot, fighting to hold onto her humanity, being sucked deeper and deeper into unreality despite herself. Her eyes glazed, and she slumped against the mattress, lost to the delusions that rose out of her own mind and swallowed her.

As Margle prepared a needle for Timothy, the mutant almost thought of resisting. But the Other was waiting . . .

"Glad to see you're reasonable now," Margle said.

"Bastard."

"Cliche," Margle noted. "I really expected more from someone as literate as yourself."

Ti said nothing more, but watched the needle slide into his puncture-marked hip. He felt the drug hit him faster than ever before. That would have worried him if he had not been looking forward to meeting the Other. Now addiction was secondary to what he might be able to achieve through PBT.

"Sweet dreams," Margle said, turning and leaving with the battered Baker, who cast Ti a chilling ugly look that swore a permanent revenge for what had been done to him the previous day.

The door clanged.

The key turned in the lock.

A chain fell in place.

Then quiet.

Then dreams . . .

This time he was lying in a field where tall, exceedingly colorful flowers sprang out of the ground, grew arms, legs, became flower women. There were reds and yellows, burnt oranges and creams, emeralds and deeply shimmering blues. The petals turned into hair of the same color, and the women came forth, smiling, fragrant, delivered of Mother Earth. But one of the flowers bloomed and was transformed into the Other. Dream Timothy rose from his blossom bed and approached the spectral figure. Closer . . . closer . . . the Other seemed to have more solidity now. They touched . . . and meshed. And the Other was within him. And . . .

. . . He woke again, his mind crystal clear as he laid on his bed in the basement room of the house.

He was aware of thoughts that were not his own. He expanded his mind, realized he was picking up Polly's emanations, was experiencing her dreams as if they were his. She was being thrust through hideous nightmares in which her beautiful face had been disfigured by acid . . .

He extended his mind further.

He soared into a cluster of thoughts he recognized immediately as Jon Margle's. They shifted about him like colored

neon tubes, flashes of amber and rouge and cinnabar, sparklings of silver and great pulsing clouds of muddy brown.

He shifted . . .

And the next mind was Baker's. It was a vast, unbroken whiteness. Along the rim of the featureless plain were flashes of blood-colored lightning, thoughts of hideous, terrifying savageness. But the orderly, solid white paved over all else.

He let his mind return to the basement room, into his own body once more. He was just in time to hear Polly scream . . .

She thrashed on the bed and clawed desperately at the sheets as one of her dream phantoms chased her down imaginary corridors. He wished there were something he could do for her, and he was maddened by the thought that, had he had more experience with his developing psi power, he might have been able to reach into her mind and counter the dark visions that plagued her.

Then he thought of the door and what he should have done immediately. He sent his psionic power to it, sent it into the lock to unkey it . . .

. . . And the Other passed through him, returning him to the world of the PBT delusions and the insubstantial form of Dream Timothy. Again, the meshing had not been complete. He wondered, agonizingly, how long it would require to solidify the uniting of his two parts. He did not want to think about the possibility of that never transpiring. He allowed the illusions to entertain him . . .

But they had lost something of their color and texture and were little better than a senso-theater show now. Time and again he found himself waking into reality for short moments, listening to Polly thrashing at the demons that tormented her. As he watched her and thought about what they were trying to do to her—and what they had already done by trampling her innocence irretrievably into the bottom of her soul—he wondered if he could kill them. Not as he had killed Klaus Margle and the two gunmen with him that night so long ago—this time, he wondered if he would be able to torture them a little first, if his hatred had grown that bitter . . .

CHAPTER 10

Timothy woke before the girl and was forced to lie there, listening to her squeals of terror, her cries for help. When she did wake, she was so exhausted she fell into a sound sleep until it was necessary for him to rouse her when supper arrived. As they ate, they talked, and Timothy was tempted, several times, to reveal the thread of the chance they had: his developing psionic abilities. She needed reassurance, for she was terribly depressed now. But he had no way of knowing if the room were bugged or not, and he wasn't anxious to let the Brethren know they might be destroying themselves rather than him by administering the PBT.

As they were finishing the meal, Polly heard the familiar two sets of footsteps approaching their door. "Margle and that beast?" she asked.

He nodded. "Two doses a day."

Her eyes widened. "But at two a day, you don't have any time to hold onto reality. You're either drugged or sleeping it off."

"That's it," he said. He didn't tell her that he had been eagerly awaiting this dose, wanting a chance to meet the Other again.

She tried to resist Jon Margle, but only earned herself a series of stinging slaps across the face and a more brutal injection than she might otherwise have received.

Timothy was the model of docility, and Margle enjoyed that, smiling at him rather smugly and making the injection a gentle one. Then he turned and was gone, two pair of feet on the floor, the slam of the door, the rattle of the key in the lock. The ritual had, by this time, almost a religious significance.

Polly moaned, but not unpleasantly.

Timothy closed his eye and relaxed. There was a light-headedness, followed by a feeling of floating above the bed without benefit of his mobility system. Then the drug thrust him out of that basement room and into a field of bright flowers . . .

The Other was waiting. He stood a dozen feet away, his hands in his pockets, eyes staring intensely at Dream Timothy. He was both a welcome and a frightening specter.

The flowers, this time, did not change into women.

They swayed in the soft breeze, the odors of them sweet, almost rotten-sweet as they came to him.

The Other drifted forward.

Dream Timothy did not make any effort to rush forth to meet him, for he was somehow aware that it was not necessary. The meeting about to transpire, the meshing of two into one, was inevitable.

Closer . . .

"They are trying to do to you what the military tried to do so long ago," the Other said. "Do you understand that?" It was the first time he had spoken.

"I know," Timothy said.

"They're trying to make you helpless again. It's the way of the world. Governments proceed the same way against subjects, man against man. They want to remove every vestige of self-respect from you and instill in you a doubt of your own abilities and a fuzziness of purpose."

"I know."

"They'll never be able to do it again. Not now that we are together," the Other said.

"I know."

They meshed. They locked.

Flowers swayed, wilted, and dissolved.

The walls of the basement appeared again, permanently this time, and Timothy felt the full weight of the power within his mind as it surged and leaped. The power to do anything he pleased . . .

He reached up through the floors of the house, through concrete reinforced with steel rods, through soundproofing, through tangled wires, through floorboards, and sought out the richly thought-filled consciousness of Jon Margle. He found it, skirted the edge of it, getting the feel of the tangle of emotions and desires and plans that beat like thousands of different hearts within that single skull. It had been confusing when only this morning he had merely let himself ride through the cerebral river of the Brother's mind. Now that he wanted to take full control of it, the task was infinitely more difficult. He thought his power was limitless, but he could not be certain—and a battle within another man's mind for control of that mind might very well be a psychologically shattering experience.

He opened the door, however, and walked in . . .

His mind grasped the intangible elements of Jon Margle's mind and forced them into an analogue of something which Timothy could comprehend: a party in a huge house; Margle's mind accepted the form of a house, and his thoughts were the members of the celebration . . .

. . . In the first room, there were two hundred gaily dressed men and women dancing across the glittering onyx floor, while crystal chandeliers twirled overhead, casting marvelous reflections in the polished stone below. Many of them were colorfully clothed in satins and laces of all the brightest hues, the women in low-cut gowns, the men in velvet suits with flowing capes.

The chatter of shrill conversation and squealed bursts of laughter was so utterly intense that Timothy could not make out a single word spoken by any of those who were present. There was a roar of noise without any fine delineation between speakers. The dancers moved so swiftly that their faces were nothing more than blurs, and their bodies were flashes of brilliant yellow, emerald, red.

He crossed the ballroom, stumbling into a great number of

people, rebounding, excusing himself. He passed through the archway into a drawing-room where a number of people sat about engaged in conversation, speaking quietly and almost reverently, a totally different group from those engaged in the madness of the ballroom. From there, he went into a long dining-hall that contained an enormous banquet table where one man in a blue and green clown suit sat and nibbled in melancholy fashion at deep purple grapes.

He spoke to the man.

He received no reply.

He continued.

It seemed that he knew where to go, almost instinctively, to seize control of this house—though he had never attempted anything like this before.

He found the kitchen, sparkling white-walled place that looked stunningly like an operating theater in some large city hospital. On the table were cuts of meat. They were fresh. They gleamed with beads of blood. Each cut, he saw, was some portion of human anatomy . . .

He looked away from that. He did not, at this moment, want to think about the nature of the mind which he had entered, the sort of ugly dreams and visions it contained.

In the kitchen, he found the pantry door, opened it, went through and carefully went down the cellar steps. The walls here were of natural rock, and odd, dark creatures clung to the wall, staring at him with huge, luminous eyes. He was aware that these creatures knew very little about the house upstairs and that the people up there knew absolutely nothing about the demons below them.

In the last room of the basement, where dark-winged things cowered from him, he found the power generator of the house, changed the lock upon it with tools he created out of thin air, and forged the only key to that lock . . .

The analogue disappeared, and he was in total control of Jon Margle. He looked out through the Brother's eyes at the room in which the man had been sitting. It was a study with thick, green carpeting, oak-paneled walls, bookshelves full of volumes that seemed to have been selected by the most common of literary standards: the color of the bindings and their

harmony with the chamber's decor. Margle was seated at a heavy plasti-wood desk, in a tulip-shaped chair on a swivel base. There was no one else in the room.

Briskly, Ti scanned the man's thoughts and discovered there were three others in the house. Baker, of course. A man named Leopold, from Chicago, was sleeping in a bedroom just down the hall. Timothy was startled to discover, through the captured mind he possessed, that Leopold was Jon Margle's superior. Ti pushed his curiosity about the power structure of the Brethren to the back of his mind and got on with immediate business. The third man was named Siccoli and, like Baker, was a surgically created bodyguard.

He directed Margle to call Baker into the study. This was accomplished by pressing a stud on the desktop that sent lights flashing throughout the house. On the third burst of color, Baker's footsteps sounded on the stairs. When the giant entered the room, Timothy almost lost control of Margle as his emotions welled up and cracked the shell of his cold psionic intellectualism. He held the anger and hate in check and used Margle to say, "Get Mr. Leopold and Siccoli over here. I have received some orders."

When Baker left his master's study, unaware that his master now had a master of his own, Timothy rifled Margle's store of knowledge and discovered the location of a nonlethal pin gun in the top left drawer of the desk. He got it out and held it in Margle's lap, under the desk. He waited for almost five minutes before the three men entered, then directed them to sit on the couch facing the desk from the other side of the room.

"Dammit, I just got to sleep!" Leopold said. He was a brawny man who had begun to let his physique slip and was now entering the first stages of desolation—that desolation of forgetfulness that looks so much worse than the heaviness of a man who was born to be heavy.

Margle-Timothy raised the narcodart pistol and unloaded a third of a clip of darts at the men across the room. By the time Baker and Siccoli fell, they were halfway across the study, trying to get him. Leopold had only begun to rise, and when half a dozen needles stung his belly, he folded like a collapsi-

ble chair. Margle-Timothy directed the barrel of the weapon on his stomach and fired. In a few moments, Jon Margle was asleep.

He left the quiet house of Margle's mind and returned to his own husk in the basement. Before he did anything else, he had to take care of Polly and make certain she was well out of the way. He drifted over to her and hovered beside her. With invisible fingers of ESP, he reached within her and tenderly exorcised the PBT from her system, restored unhealthy cells to health, leaving her even better than she had been before she had become involved in all of this.

When she was awake, she was full of questions. He answered only those which he felt like answering, and only for as long as it took him to escort her to a grav-plate car which he found parked before the house. Now that the ESP powers within him had reached maturity, she did not seem so beautiful or so fragile or so interesting. He realized that, having fulfilled this part of his evolution, he had divorced himself completely from empathy with other human beings. But his hatred remained: there was a job to do on the Brethren, and he would see it done. Besides, as he concentrated on the problem of finding their headquarters and tearing down their organization, his mind was free from worrying about the future, a future bound to be lonely, a future with a challenge so large it frightened him . . .

"I'm afraid you'll get yourself in trouble," she said as he was closing the door of the car behind her. "They're tough men."

"And I'm god," he said.

She started the car then, as she realized he did not want to talk any more and that he would not be swayed by any arguments she could give. "Be careful," she said.

"I don't have to."

When the car was out of sight, he walked back to the house on his invisible legs, no longer using the grav-plate mobility mechanism in his silver trunk cap. At the house, he called his servos to his side and smashed them repeatedly against the wall until they were shattered and useless. He no longer needed those, either.

He reached out with his psi and opened the door.

It swung inward.

He went inside and drifted up the steps toward the second floor where the four drugged members of the Brethren awaited him . . .

CHAPTER 11

The four Brothers were exactly as Timothy had left them, slumped on the floor in almost comic disarray, like tired children who had flung themselves down in exhaustion and had swiftly fallen asleep. Margle had slid down in his tulip chair until he was precariously close to falling out of it, into the cavity under his desk. The sound of their breathing was even and deep, indicating that they would require quite a few more hours of unconsciousness before they would fully weather the effects of the darts and could move without grogginess.

Which suited Ti's purposes perfectly.

He drifted to Jon Margle and extended prying fingers of thought into his mind without totally occupying the body as he had done earlier. The analogue of the house was the continued manner in which Timothy's own mind chose to present Margle's thoughts to him. In the main ballroom, the dancing had stopped and colorful figures had disappeared. The place was empty, desolate, like the littered morning-after of a party. This, of course, was the conscious mind that had been stilled by the narcotics in the darts. In the cellar, the demons teemed as fully as before. And though there were many things that were not in the cellar of his mind, in the subconscious, that had been in his conscious, there were a number of things Ti could discover.

It had come as a surprise when he had discovered earlier that Jon Margle, and his brother Klaus before him, were nothing more than figureheads, puppets painted to look like authority, but with all the strings carefully hidden. The Inner Council made all the decisions, a group consisting of Leopold and six other men Margle could not even name. But surpassing this revelation was what Timothy learned as he probed the Brother's subconscious now. Besides Margle's ignorance about his superiors, the man had no knowledge whatsoever concerning the source of PBT!

Refusing to believe such could be the case, he rampaged through the cellars of Margle's subconscious mind, prodding the hideous denizens of these lairs (beings which were concretizations of Margle's id longings, the festering fantasies of his ego), searching for some clue he might have overlooked. But there was nothing in his mind, in the vast catalogue of the man's data storage cells, that pointed to any solution of the mystery.

At last, perplexed, he left the mind. He turned to Leopold next, and probed lightly into his quieted mind. Surely a man of the Inner Council would know where the stuff came from, where the home lab was, and what might compose the unidentifiable substance.

In dealing with the totally different mind of Leopold, Timothy's psionic system established another type of analogue of the Brother's thoughts. Instead of a house that had represented Jon Margle's mental landscape, there was a towering, thousand-storied block building whose walls glittered dark emerald, a sinister color that seemed shot through with pulsing veins and clotted, dark lumps of indefinable material. Inside the structure, the walls were ringed with data banks, billions upon billions of memory units storing nearly every minute detail of Leopold's life; he was, apparently, the sort of man who forgot nothing—which would help to explain his position of importance in such a rugged and competitive arena.

Timothy went up through the floors of the place, calling forth data, disregarding it when it proved of no importance.

On the eighty-first floor, seconds after his entry into the mental construct, he found a bit of relevant information.

The source of PBT was a farmhouse owned by the Brethren near a small town in Iowa called Charter Oak. He sought further details and learned that Charter Oak was in the west of the state, near Sioux City. After that, Leopold's memory bank offered no more. Timothy searched through all nine hundred and nineteen floors, but whenever he got close to the subject again, Leopold's mind—even though he was unconscious—radiated fear and loathing so heavily that Timothy could not make any sense of the data. But what could the man have to fear in the synthesis of a drug?

He picked one of the data points concerned with the farmhouse and obtained a perfect picture of the place: a large, white, rambling structure that had been built of moderate size and thereafter added to every generation as the clan grew larger and larger still. There were three large trees, perhaps willows, on the flat and rolling lawn—then nothing but yawning stretches of tabletop land in all directions, the vague phantoms of other houses at distant points. There was a swing on the front porch. The inside had been renovated, supermodern and expensively furnished. The house was occupied by a couple in their early thirties, Richard and Thelma Boggs. They seemed, judging from the mental picture which Leopold had of them, the stereotype of the average Middle American farm couple. He was lanky, wiry, well-muscled, with short curly hair, a rich, leathery tan. She tended toward plumpness, with heavy breasts, a milky complexion, and large blue saucer eyes. Her mouth was drawn in a petulant pout, and she looked as if she might be just a bit difficult to get along with.

With this much in the open, Ti probed deeper, seeking the source of PBT . . .

And immediately the horror and disgust rose in Leopold's mind, blocking the existence of those memories. There was a hint of some subterranean room—or at least of a very dark and dank sort of chamber. There was a smell that was at the same time sweet and bitter, that cloyed in the nostrils and

teased a man to sickness. And that was all. Whenever Ti tried to probe more deeply, Leopold's mind grew agitated, frightened, and set up a terrified wailing that was impossible to still.

Timothy thought of searching through Leopold's subconscious mind to discover if there might be anything there that could tell him more about the farmhouse. But he could not discover how to reach the subconscious from the regions of the man's conscious mind; it was nowhere near as simple as it had been with Jon Margle. He grew more curious as he searched, unable to envision what the subconscious mind of such an orderly man would be like. At last, he was drawn to the walls of the data storage structure in which the conscious mind's analogue took form. Inside those walls there was a humming, buzzing, frantic noise, as if another level of labor were being performed. He ran his psionic fingers along the walls, felt the tremor of that labor without being able to identify it. He thrust ESP fingers out and breached the partition . . .

. . . And through the crack in the ethereal plaster rushed hundreds of thousands of hideous, bloated, roachlike insects. They had tiny, razor-edged mandibles, wicked enough to inflict a painful wound. They chittered and hummed, swarming over one another, devouring one another as they advanced, a wave of madness. In a conscious mind where nearly everything that had ever happened or been learned was stored methodically, nothing much was left to relegate to the subconscious mind except id desires of the most grotesque form. Leopold's subconscious was the exact opposite of the conscious mind: disordered, filthy, shot through with a living, mobile rot that would devour Timothy's own sanity in seconds if he did not retreat—and that would surely plunge Leopold into madness some day in the not too distant future.

Ti vacated those chambers, shivering and slightly ill. He backed off from the man, as if the roaches would swarm from his skull and into this room—when he was perfectly aware that the insects were not real, but analogues of the insubstantial qualities of Leopold's mind.

He decided it was not necessary to bind these men or shoot

them with more narcodarts. He would be at the farm before they were awake and able to send a warning. And even if the people at the farmhouse were waiting for him, what could they do to stop him? Nothing, of course. It was difficult to get accustomed to thinking in terms like "all-powerful" and "invulnerable." But they aptly described him now, and he was going to have to grasp them if he was going to use his abilities to their fullest extent.

Which meant there was no need to use a grav-car to get to Charter Oak when he had within himself a more perfected and faster method of travel than anything man could devise—despite the species' proven cunning with machines. He could teleport . . .

For a while he stood there, feeling cold in the pit of his stomach. The idea of being a disarranged string of molecules, even if only for an instant, was not appealing. Yet the longer he hesitated, the more time he was giving himself to think of other things, of the future and the lonely role he would play after this Brethren thing was done with. And he did not want to think of that yet. If ever. He concentrated, recalling the picture of the farmhouse he had drawn from Leopold's mind, burning it into his cortex. He tensed . . . and was gone . . .

He tracked along spidery filaments of blackness, a burning string of molecules cutting the pitch like a wire drawn through butter . . .

There was a singing which he heard without ears, having no ears with which to hear. It was a lonely, hollow echo, the voice of a young girl tossed into the air from the peak of some unearthly alps . . .

There was heat which he sensed without skin, having no skin.

And the same with cold.

If there was any odor at all, it was pepper and lemon, but he suspected that was only an olfactory interpretation of the same energy releases he heard in the form of a girl's scream . . .

Eons passed. But it was only less than a microsecond . . .

Ti materialized beneath the drooping, whiplike branches of one of the gnarled willow trees that punctuated the well-mowed lawn of the Boggs's farmhouse, facing the building that was to be the end of his quest. It was early evening, and the dark, ironed earth of the Midwest had only recently been shrouded in that impenetrable shadow that lies only on the plains. It was broken in but a few places by harsh, cold yellow-white light which came through the windows of the farmhouse and leaked like the blood of ghosts across the quiet carpet of the night world. The front porch was patterned with patches of intense pitch and brilliant light, with very little bleed-in space between them. Behind the somewhat dusty windows of the Brethren house, a shadow moved back and forth across the living room on some task Timothy could not quite discover.

He left the shelter of the tree's canopy and crossed to the porch, drifting up the stairs. Clinging to the wall of the house, he came to rest in a darkened area from which he could examine the scene in the living room. There were three men sitting in a conversation corner of well-padded black chairs. The moving shadow was a woman—Thelma Boggs—delivering drinks from the bar where her husband, looking out of place in a lounging robe instead of coveralls, made them to order.

Ti was about to reach into the minds of one of those three men in search of some information when he heard the slight but deadly click of someone removing the safety latch from a dart pistol. Without moving even the slightest degree, thereby maintaining the illusion that he had heard nothing, he flushed his psionic power outward and felt it contact the mind of a man much like Baker or Siccoli. The brute was sitting on the swing, had been there from the time darkness had begun to settle over the land. It was amazing he had not shot already.

Carefully, Ti pushed his ESP fingers into the pudding of the killer's brain, stirred through the dark mess of hideous images that ringed the plain of pure white he had experienced in Baker's mind earlier in the day. He found what he was

looking for, a small nerve leading up through the back of the brute's neck. He pinched it. The man sagged, passed out, slumped on the lattice of the swing seat. The gun dropped out of his hand and clattered on the floor with a noise that seemed to strike the glass darkness with a hammer, although no one inside the house seemed to notice.

To make certain his position had been secured, he directed his questing ESP throughout the grounds of the farmhouse, searching for other killers who might be on patrol. He found a man at the back of the house whose duty it was to remain at that spot come hell or hurricane. Since Ti did not plan on using the rear door, he let the man be. A third of the zombies was also behind the house, patrolling a small, white fence that corralled most of the lawn. Ti waited until he was out of sight of the rear door guard, then sent him spiraling into darkness. The Brother doubled over and fell on his head, sprawled on the dew damp grass.

There was no one else.

The night was cool, and he felt refreshed, better than he had ever felt in his life. For once, there was no question that he was any man's equal—superior, in fact. But power angle didn't interest. He was not the type to develop a desire to rule. But the knowledge of being equal, being unafraid, was magnificent!

He turned his attention back to the living room. He delved into the mind of the tall, gray-haired man who sat in the first of the three leather chairs, a drink held in his hand tight against his chest as if it were a magic stone to protect him from witches.

The analogue for his conscious mind was a well-cared for but ancient private library room where books stretched from floor to ceiling, wall after wall. There were comfortable reading chairs, a smoking stand, a desk, several floor lamps. In moments, Ti flipped through the pages of that store of knowledge, searching for the source of PBT. When he found the volume that was marked as containing this information, he found all the words had been carefully erased from the pages in a painstakingly long letter-by-letter manner. It was a hid-

eously plain attempt to forget something unpleasant. He closed the book, put it back on its shelf, and left that mind . . .

The next man was short, a good bit too heavy, and was nursing a gin and tonic like a small child with a particularly flavorful popsicle. Ti slipped into him, probing . . .

Ti's own psionic powers chose the house analogue again, though this man's mind was not so much of a mansion as Jon Margle's had been. It was instead a peeling, rotting, creak-filled gothic horror whose every shadow seemed filled with disaster and terror. There were very few thoughts to be found in it in comparison with other minds Ti had investigated, and what thoughts there were were less factual and more of a paranoid nature. Here was a man who fought the universe every day of his life. When Ti began looking for data about the source of the PBT, where he should look for it in the house, the gothic manor was soon filled with bloodcurdling screams, the sounds of a mind teetering on the brink of madness.

It was much the same in the third man's mental landscape. Though he was not a borderline schizophrenic like his Brethren, he reacted in terror to the gentle probing for the production center of the drug. This was the fourth man Ti had ransacked for the knowledge, and all of them had cringed in fear at the probing, had fought valiantly and successfully to shove that piece of the world down into their subconscious minds. What the hell, he wondered, could be so terrifying about the source of an hallucinogenic drug?

He was about to go to either Richard Boggs or his wife when he was struck with the idea of trying something in the gray-haired gentleman's mind that had eluded him the first time he had been there. He slipped back into the ancient library and moved along the shelves of books that made up the analogue of the old man's mind. In moments he found what he wanted: a switch set in the edge of a strip of shelving. He threw it and stepped back as the wall slid away and a smaller room became visible.

This portion of the analogue was a musty cubbyhole which contained a mere fifty volumes on warped, dirty shelves.

There were volumes concerned with sexual perversions, with death-wishes and with the inflicting of pain on others, all the paraphernalia of the subconscious mind. But there was also a volume on PBT. He pulled it down, opened it, and read enough of the crumbling yellow pages to ascertain that the labs, the places where the drug was produced, were in the cellars. But even so, the information was skimpy, broken, and nearly hysterical in tone. Once again he retreated from the old man's mind.

Outside the analogue, back in reality, he breathed in deeply, smelling the newly turned earth from a nearby field, letting the cool night breeze purge the perspiration from his body and set his nerves at ease.

The next step would be to black out each of those inside so that he could have unchallenged access to the house and the labs beneath it. He looked back to the bar where Richard Boggs had been mixing drinks, prepared to put the man and his wife out first, since they were nearest an exit from the room. Thelma Boggs was mixing what looked like a marvelously horrendous drink with five or six different kinds of liquor—but her husband was nowhere in sight.

And then he knew where the man was. There was a sharp intake of breath to Timothy's left. He whirled in time to see Boggs standing at the half-opened door, only partway onto the porch.

He had a gun, and he was fast.

The .22 slug tore through Timothy's chest and out his back, spattering blood against the white walls of the farmhouse . . .

CHAPTER 12

For the shortest of moments, Timothy felt as if he were dropping helplessly down a narrow well toward a pool of brackish water while the light dimmed with every foot of his descent; darkness stretched around him, obscuring the moss-covered stone walls and reaching fingers out to grasp and hold him. Then his senses overcame the stifling shock of having been wounded, and his psionically gifted mind shifted into high gear where—he angrily admonished himself—it should have been from the moment he had teleported onto this farm.

Also, in the back of his mind, he was aware that there had been a few seconds there when he had felt relief at the prospect of dying, had welcomed it. It would obliterate the future and the loneliness ahead of him as the only superman in a world of neanderthals. And loneliness was the thing he most feared, the thing which had terrified him all his life. But he did not want to think about how easily he had almost given in. There was no loneliness quite like death, after all—so that was no way out of his predicament.

And although he might be something of a superman, death was still all too possible. If Boggs had aimed for his head, his irreplaceable brain in which all his talents lay, rather than for his chest . . .

He pinched the proper nerve in Richard Boggs's neck with

an ESP finger and watched the man fold into himself and crash onto the floorboards of the porch, taking the impact on his chin. He bounced once, as if he were rubber, and was still.

Another bullet smashed the window out in front of Timothy as one of the three Brethren who had been sitting in the conversation corner fired through the glass. The projectile itself missed him, but whirling shards of glass studded the side of his trunk in a hundred different places. Pain washed through him, again bringing blackness with it. It was growing more difficult to stave off the questing, pitch fingers of unconsciousness.

He expanded his extrasensory powers, radiating his talent into the house where he quickly made the three Brothers and Thelma Boggs unconscious. They slumped into a peaceful sleep on the hardwood floor. The uproar had ended as swiftly as it had begun, and the heavy quiet of the Iowa night settled over the place once more.

Ti reached into the mind of the surgically created moronic killer who stood guard at the rear door of the farmhouse. The man had not moved more than three feet since Timothy had last checked on him, but he was contemplating leaving his post after the ruckus that had just exploded and died so rapidly in the front of the house. For insurance, and because he did not want the man to have a chance to humiliate him as he had been humiliated twice already, Timothy sent him spiraling down into sleep on a mattress of damp grass. In sleep, the man's nearly blank mind was almost totally empty.

There was no one in the house or anyone on the grounds who was not unconscious and who would not be that way for at least another hour. With this in mind, Timothy hung by the shattered window, calming himself, forcing his overexcited mind to settle into rationality. He surveyed the damage that had been done his body and found that the bullet wound was clean. It had not touched any vital organs, though it had been close to his heart. He thrust his psionic fingers into his own flesh, plunging them into the cellular level of his tissue, where he used them to knit the torn meat. He meshed cell to

cell, threaded the filaments of muscle fiber into one another again. In ten minutes, there was not even a scar . . .

When that was finished, he plucked the slivers of glass from his skin and mended the sliced flesh until it was smooth and healthy. He expunged the blood that had wet and matted his simple clothes, and used his psionic power to break it down into molecules of heat energy that radiated away from him. Then there was nothing further to be done to correct the abuse his body had suffered. Now he would have to enter the house and find the cellar.

For the first time he felt a tinge of fear. Four men had been familiar with that basement area and what was to be found down there—and all four of them had been so terrified that they had locked it from their minds, had attempted to shove it from the conscious arena of their mental processes down into the backrooms where it could be forgotten. For the most part these were strong men, not easily scared. He could not help but feel uneasy about confronting whatever it was that had made men such as these afraid even to think of it.

But this was not the time to hesitate. He had come all this way to find the source of the drug, to discover exactly what it was and how it was produced. An entire underworld 'family' had been built on it; tens of thousands had become addicted to it while hundreds of thousands of others used it frequently or infrequently; it had taken his own limited extrasensory functions and had torn down the walls to allow them to flow through his mind in full glory. Besides, it was the temporary goal he had set for himself, in order to conceal the fact that he had made no plans for a future that was, now, even more uncertain than before: how could a superman exist in a world of normally powered men without becoming a symbol of what everyone else was denied; and how could a man to whom anything was possible find tasks complex enough to avoid complete boredom?

He felt cold, separate from all the world. He was aware that the last time he had been with Polly, helping her into the car that would take her from the Brethren's house in New England, even the starlet's fantastic beauty had not stirred

the hollow quasi-sexual longing within him. He was so separated from mankind that a normal woman, even beautiful, could not resurrect his crippled sexuality. He was alone.

He floated over Richard Boggs, through the open door of the farmhouse, and into the livingroom where Thelma Boggs lay in the middle of the floor on her back, her mouth open. She was snoring heartily.

He went through the parlor, through a dining nook and into the well-appointed kitchen which Thelma Boggs did not keep in a very admirable state. There were dirty dishes in the sink, on the drainboard, slimed with grease and dried food. There was a dirty pan and skillet on the stove and a scattering of cooking utensils and ingredients on the kitchen table. There was a desk in the corner littered with pieces of mail, recipes, women's magazines, two dirty glasses, an overflowing ashtray, and a stat order catalogue with a dozen felt markers dangling from it.

His eye strayed from the teetering piles of junk on the desk to a door recessed slightly in the wall to his left. He floated to it, opened it with invisible hands, and flipped the light switch along the wall. Panels of glow lights burst into bright existence in the ceiling, the sort of thing one might expect to see in a place of business or a supermodern house—but hardly in a renovated farm. He dropped down the stairwell, ignoring the steps.

As he fell, he flushed his psionic power into the lower chambers. He found no one waiting for him, no mental activity whatsoever.

As he floated out of the stairwell, he found himself in a square, concrete-walled room where tools were racked on pegboards. Two workbenches flanked him, their tops fixed with hand vises and hand drill braces. In the right corner there was a drill press, and next to it an electric sander and buffer. Beside one of the workbenches was a crate of souvenirs, little brass Mexican men leading little brass donkeys, similar if not identical to the piece he had seen in Leonard Taguster's house.

He picked one of the souvenirs up, holding it above him so

he could see it from all angles as he twirled it lazily in his unseen fingers. There were no marks on it to indicate where it might have been violated, but he thought he knew exactly what had been done. He threaded his ESP through the tightly packed molecules until he found the cylindrical pocket inside the statuette where a small flask of PBT was contained, perhaps a large enough amount—once cut to proper potency—for thirty doses.

Here, at these two benches and with these machines, the Brethren hollowed out the figures, placed the drug inside, then resmelted the chips of brass that had been scooped out, filled in over the flask, sanded, buffed, polished, and replaced the pieces in the crates. After that, someone would come and pick the souvenirs up for mailing to various points in this country and all over the world. It was a tedious and time-consuming process, to be sure, but the price of PBT and the small quantity needed for a usual dose made it quite worthwhile. Besides, it was safe, and men like the Brethren put a price on safety that was higher than that placed on turning a large profit. They knew very well that the United Nations would use the slightest excuse to stick them away in some well-guarded prison for the rest of their lives.

This explained the difficulty the narcotics agents had met with for so long, though it still did not explain how PBT was manufactured or what it was. And it certainly did not explain the terror with which the Brethren regarded the cellar. He drifted from this room into another where crates of figurines of various types lined all the walls. Without slowing, he entered the final chamber. It was an unfinished basement room with cement slapped formlessly over the earth walls. The floor was dirt. There was no light here, except what drifted in from other chambers. Somehow, he felt as if he were on the verge of discovering what he had been looking for . . .

The place was a storage chamber for junk, broken lawnmowers and shattered wheelbarrows, old newspapers and magazines, the things everyone saves against his best judgment. In the far corner of the room, the floor sloped into a jumble of rocks, then disappeared altogether as a limestone sinkhole yawned in the bowels of the earth. The hole had

probably opened after the house had been built. He wondered how long it would take before it would split wide enough to swallow one of the foundation walls.

He balanced above the gap in the floor, looking down into blackness. Using his ESP, he felt about the rim of the aperture and discovered a switch box just inside the rim of the depression. When he threw the toggle, soft yellow light sprang up within the cave, and he knew he had discovered the production center for the hallucinogen.

And, looking down into that hole, he had an inkling of the horror with which the Brethren viewed this place. He could not pinpoint what bothered him, but there was a feel of the—supernatural. It was a silly word, but it fit. He shuddered, took a deep breath, and descended . . .

The primary drop shaft of the sinkhole was some seventy feet long, breaking a bit to the left, then back to the right, but maintaining a fairly true vertical descent. Huge blocks of fractured rock formed the sides, tumbled against one another to form small caves and *cul-de-sacs* that were either too small for men to gain admittance or led nowhere once one was inside them. Here and there bats clung to overhanging rocks, eyes blinded by the light, wings folded tight against them, as if the flimsy membranes would give them protection. Along the right side, a series of rungs bolted firmly into the stone provided a means down for those who had no ESP.

At the bottom of the main plummet, Timothy found he had to angle his body sideways to get through a bottleneck in the tunnel. He brushed through, scraping the worn surfaces of the rocks, and found himself in a large chamber whose dimensions rivaled those of an old-fashioned baseball stadium. He righted himself and spent a few moments marveling at the stalactites and stalagmites, at the grotesque weathering of the stone that dripping streams of water had managed to sculpt in the last handful of centuries. A stream of water, no wider than a yardstick and perhaps a foot or two deep, wound through the vaulted cavern, making gurgling, baby laughter that rang from the walls in hundreds of different echoes that sounded like other streams whispering in response. The air was almost cold and carried a damp, musty

smell that was unpleasant and generated a feeling of claustrophobia despite the dimensions of the cave.

He drifted along the room toward the far end, which was slanted downward at a rather sharp angle. When the floor began tilting at a forty-five-degree slope, he saw the rungs again, bolted solidly into the stone, and he knew he was still on the trail of whatever it was that was nestled here in the belly of the earth.

And then he saw it . . .

At the bottom of the long slope, a magnificent length of emerald-colored metal gleamed as if it had been buffed and waxed only moments before. It was a hundred feet long and seemed to disappear into the rock itself, as if it were a piece of cosmic pipe that had been capped here in case an extension was ever required. It tapered as it grew closer to him, unlike a pipe, and the end of it was not capped but open. As he drew closer, he realized that the huge tubes, each twenty feet across, that were recessed in the terminal aperture were vaguely reminiscent of rocket boosters, although of an altogether different type and size from anything he had seen before.

As his sense of eeriness and fear began to blossom within him, he realized that he was looking upon what could be only a portion of an alien vessel, a starship which buried itself in the earth so long ago that no man could have existed to watch it. At that time, man was little more than a slimy thing newly crawled from the ocean and fighting desperately to grow legs fast enough to keep from being pushed into extinction by the irresistible natural forces of the world which had spawned it.

He drifted along the hull, looking for a way inside, for he was now certain that the Brethren were getting the PBT from this artifact that could—despite the death of its crew—just possibly still be functioning in some areas. Perhaps the stuff came from the ship's medical supplies, drugs which were nothing more than antibiotics to the extraterrestrials but hallucinogenics to men. At last, he saw the circular port which stood open on the far side of the ship, giving view to impenetrable blackness.

He hovered before it, trying to peer inside, but could not see anything. He searched for a light switch. There was none.

He waited, listening, but could hear no noise within the great ship. He searched for the telltale sign of Brethren presence with his psionic abilities. There was no one here. Hesitantly, he went inside . . .

CHAPTER 13

The corridor of the starship was more of a tube than a hallway, lacking any well-defined floor, the walls and ceiling merely curving together without benefit of a seam. As he floated warily into the alien structure, the walls themselves began to illuminate his way, glowing dully blue for twenty feet on either side of him. He tried to see how the lighting functioned, but his gaze met only the flat surface of the metal walls, and he could not focus well enough to see any way the light could possibly be shining through. He abandoned that pursuit when his eye began to water. He continued down the corridor, carefully studying every projection or recession along the way, waiting expectantly for something horrible to happen.

Shortly, the entrance tube passed through the reinforced doorway, and it seemed as if his progress was to be halted by a thick door painted in spirals of green and gray. But as he approached, the spirals swirled, the door irised, and he passed through into the first room that he had seen since clambering through the exterior hatch.

It was a small room, perhaps fifteen feet square—except that it was *not* square; it had no angles whatsoever. The room was perfectly round inside. There was a storage rack of what appeared to be space activity suits, though they were not

suits so much as very small cars, hardly larger than a man, into which a man might slide like a foot into a boot.

Timothy noticed with interest that there was no room for a man's legs in one of these capsules, though the vehicles were otherwise roughly tailored to humanoid dimensions and requirements. Perhaps even more mysteriously, there was no control console of any sort visible within the devices, no wheel or stick for guiding them and no instruments for monitoring conditions internally or externally. There was only a seat shaped like a shallow cup, a great deal of rolled padding. It was the most alien thing he had seen thus far, this total lack of toggles and switches and buttons which decorated all earthly devices.

The next stretch of hallway led to a huge chamber forty feet across and easily eighty feet long. Timothy was aware that now he must be in that portion of the starship which was wedged into the rock, the part he had not been able to see from outside. He was amazed that the interior of the vessel showed no damage, and he suspected that the exterior might prove the same if it could be extricated from the viselike grip of the earth.

Again, this room contained no corners, and the eye was permitted to rest on hundreds of gentle curves both in the design of the room itself and in the furniture which had been bolted into it. There were chairs and couches and slings, all of which were heavily padded and low-slung. There were machines beside all the chairs and couches, thrusting down from the ceiling next to the slings. He investigated the mechanism of one of them and decided that it was a greatly perfected version of the senso-theater projector. He wondered what sort of programs it provided for the creatures who came here to be entertained; then he forced himself to stop extrapolating on every item that caught his attention. If he gave way to his questing curiosity about every device, it would take him a lifetime to make his way through the ship.

He left the theater and drifted into another brief section of corridor with iris-ing doors to either side of it that led to private chambers which seemed to be living quarters with

chain-hung sling beds. Shortly after entering the third major chamber through which the main tube corridor passed, he gained the end of the temporary goal which he had set for himself: he uncovered the source of PBT.

The room was another sphere of approximately the same dimensions as the first he had encountered upon entering the starship. Here, though, there were some noticeable and notable differences of architecture. The walls, ceiling, and even the floor were covered with access plates to blocks of machinery and with readout screens that appeared to be communications links to the ship computers. He searched into them with his ESP, through circuitry not unlike human electrical equipment, and verified that guess. There was a walkway through the maze of wires and slots and raised modules, although it was so straight and narrow that it could never have been used by the technicians who would have to service these machines when they malfunctioned, or by the crew who would be using the devices.

Timothy drifted to the first series of drawers that seemed to slide into the walls themselves and was not at all surprised when the thing rolled out at his approach. It was large enough, both in length and depth, to contain him, and he fancied it very nearly contoured to the form of a body, but for the lack of leg space. It was laced across with friction straps to tie down whatever cargo it had been meant to hold. When he drifted lower to look in the drawer and to the space above it that was revealed when it was open, he saw a series of spidery-fingered hands that seemed to hold surgical instruments. He straightened, his curiosity aroused more than it had been at any moment since his entrance. He opened the next drawer and found the same setup, the needles and surgical equipment. When he pulled open the third drawer, hoping that he would find some variance which—by comparison—would help him to understand the nature of these drawers, he was confronted by the penetrating stare of the alien which lay within . . .

CHAPTER 14

He gasped, startled, and rushed backwards, away from the open drawer. He came to an abrupt halt as his own foolishness became evident to him. Even if he ran, he could not get out of here in time—not if they knew he was aboard. And if his extrasensory powers were of no use to him, there was nowhere on earth he could count himself safe; if they were useful, he had nothing to worry about.

He also began to realize that the thing he had seen was not a living, breathing creature, but a corpse. If it had been alive, the world would surely have heard about it and from it a good many years ago; the Brethren would not have been able to exploit the wonders of the starship towards their own ends. That creature lying in the drawer was not the kind of fellow anyone exploited—if he wished to live to the end of his natural days.

He went back, somewhat ashamed at himself and his fainthearted reaction.

But he returned slowly, nevertheless.

He peered over the brink of a surgical drawer, far less frightened now that he knew what to be prepared for.

The alien stared up at him with two, huge, multifaceted eyes that had no differentiation between pupil and iris. Each of them was nothing more than a fist-sized convexity of a milky blue opaque color that somehow reminded him of fine

china. Each eye was beveled, like the eye of a fly. The nose was actually more human than Timothy's own, though somewhat wider and flatter and possessed of one nostril rather than two. The man was thin, and his lips were almost like pencil lines. Gleaming through a gap in those lips were teeth of a human character. Indeed, the eyes were the only truly alien features, aside from the abnormally high and bulbous forehead. But they were enough to have given Ti that mild case of panic when he had come across them unexpectedly.

He noticed, too, that the alien was armless and legless, though he did not consider this so nonhuman. Its condition had not been a matter of accident or amputation, for its body was too smoothly, perfectly, formed for that. It had been limbless its entire life—and apparently for the same reason that Timothy was limbless. He was excited by the thought. Both he and this alien had been born with an extrasensory power that made limbs unnecessary . . .

Timothy thought back over all the things he had noticed since he boarded the starship, all the clues that should have fit together and completed the puzzle even before he was presented with the answer in the form of this corpse: the lack of true floors (which would not matter to a race which had the ability to levitate and propel itself with psychic energy rather than legs), the lack of controls in the extravehicular "spacesuits" (which would not be even desirable to a race which had evolved away from hands and which could monitor its machines, for the most part, with its psionic eyes and ears and hands), and the lack of an overall lighting system in favor of one where illumination followed you around (a race with so much psionic power would certainly have no vestigial fears of the dark and would require light only as a convenience to show them the way more easily; indeed, they very well might have learned to see with their ESP and without light, in which case the illumination would be here for guests, other intelligent races of the galaxy that might come aboard). Here was a race whose "paranormal" abilities were its birth-right; he wondered how much more advanced than he they were.

He was able to see, quite readily, why the Brethren had been so horrified by what they had discovered down here and had, to a man, tried to conceal what they had seen from even themselves. Timothy was accustomed to the corruption of the human form, for his own mortal shell was certainly as much of a freak as that of the alien. Years ago, he had ceased looking in the mirror, but he *knew* what corruption was, knew it with every breath he drew into lungs that were not quite right, with every mouthful of food his twisted stomach ingested. He could accept this alien form, even be pleased with it. However, those who were used to the pretty face and the handsome body would swiftly rebel at the concept of an entire race of beings such as this. They could only conceive of them as hideously evil and, to avoid nightmares, they would have to shove what they had seen deep into the subconscious pockets of their minds.

He touched the nearly invisible transparent plastic shield that fitted over the alien, traced his ESP fingers on it. It was bitter cold, though no frost had formed inside.

The morgue . . .

Yet, if these creatures had such well-developed psionic abilities, why was this man-thing lying here dead? Why couldn't he have reached within his own body and cured whatever was wrong with him, just as Timothy had found he could cure his own wounds, heal breached flesh? He examined the body more closely and discovered why it had been unable to heal itself. There was a hole in its neck, angled upward into the skull. Whatever had killed it had forced its way into the brain. It was the only sort of wound that could kill a psionic man—and it must have come too suddenly and unexpectedly for him to use his powers to avoid it.

He wondered if the Brethren had killed it. But the hole was ragged and too large to have been made by a bullet. He could not imagine a Brother carrying any weapon but a gun.

Turning from the drawer, he surveyed the rest of the chamber, now more aware of what he should be looking for. He began to see that much of the machinery was of a medical nature, designed to perform almost any surgical function.

This did not fit the concept of a psionic race that could cure itself. He reminded himself, however, that this was a totally alien culture and atmosphere he had entered and that his own rules did not necessarily apply. Besides, it was quite logical that a robotic hospital might be provided for guests on the ship who were of races other than that of these creatures. There was a walkway through the chamber, after all, and *that* certainly wasn't for the creatures like that dead one in the morgue drawer.

As Ti continued his investigation of the room, he saw a series of plastic flasks into which stainless steel tubes were dripping fluids of various colors. His mind registered the data after his eye had passed it by, and he looked swiftly back, more excited by this than he had been by his discovery of the alien corpse lying in the preservation drawer of the morgue. Of the six flasks, the second from the right was filling up with an amber fluid which looked strikingly like the PBT that Margle had boosted into his veins all those times in the basement of the house in New England.

He drifted across the chamber to the bottle and looked at it more closely. On the floor, beneath the flask, there was a thick plasti-glass jug of the sort often used to hold cider or wine. It was half full of the amber fluid. Timothy lifted it, examined it, and discovered it had been made in Pernborth, New Jersey. It was most assuredly not an artifact from another world. The Brethren entered the room every day, perhaps twice a day judging by the production rate of the fluid, collected a full bottle, dumped it into the jug, replaced the bottle and left. When the jug was full, they would take the PBT away to be put into small flasks and inserted into brass statuettes for distribution. When they returned to collect the latest supply, a new jug would be brought along.

The combination of the supertechnical alien machines and the plastic cider jug was almost comical. He would have laughed, except for the thoughts of Leonard Taguster and the other thousands who had had their lives ruined by the stuff.

And it was no wonder that the police laboratories had not yet been able to break down the chemical composition of the

stuff. Whatever it was, it was utterly unhuman, unearthly. It had come from another star system, perhaps even from another galaxy. There was little likelihood that any earthly analysis would ever decode the structure of the substance. Metals, such as these steel tubes, might be fairly uniform throughout large sections of the galaxy. But plant life would differ from world to world. Animal life would differ too, perhaps even more radically. And since the serums more than likely were produced from animal or vegetable sources, an earth laboratory would meet a blank wall every time it applied its own standards and knowledge to the task.

Around the machine, the access plating had been pried loose and bent back as if the Brethren had summoned experts to examine the guts of the mechanism, perhaps searching for some manner of accelerating the production of the priceless fluid. There was a fantastically miniaturized and complex system behind the plating, more involved than anything Timothy had ever seen, even in the SAM built by Weapons Psionic. This indecipherable mess of circuits and switches had apparently dissuaded the Brethren from tinkering with it (and thereby possibly losing what supply they could obtain), because they had never bothered to remove the plating the entire way. Considering the Brethren he knew, it was difficult to believe they would be satisfied with such a slight attempt to change the flow of PBT. Perhaps their fear augmented their ignorance of the machinery. Perhaps they felt that death waited on anyone who would attempt to fool with the works of creatures like the one lying in the morgue drawer.

Finally, there was nothing more to be discovered in the chamber, at least on a casual survey of the sort upon which he was now embarked. Later he would return and delve into things with his ESP, study and comprehend whatever he could. He moved toward the main tubeway.

He was anxious to return to the surface and his mountain-side home where he could contact United Nations narcotics people and break the story to them. After, of course, breaking it to the world in *Enterstat* first. He did not particularly care

about getting the scoop on anyone anymore. Strangely, he did not even care whether *Enterstat* folded. But the chance to explode something like this would give George Creel more pleasure than he received from editing a thousand regular editions.

There was still more of the starship to explore, and he wanted to have everything down pat before turning the matter over to the authorities. That was a habit he had gotten into after previous disastrous encounters with the police . . .

In the corridor, the eerie blue light preceded him, emanating softly and inexplicably from the walls. He was reminded of a funhouse in a carnival, one of those nightmare places where the public (most of them reasonably sane but in need of some fear in a world where daily life grew more and more comfortable and unadventurous) paid to be given the opportunity to find its way through a dark maze of passages where anything and everything might leap out to block the way at the most unexpected times, where there were ghosts, goblins, and ghouls who were nonetheless frightening for their plastic and cardboard natures. But the comparison did nothing for his nerves, and he abandoned it before the submerged fear rose out of his mind again.

In another twenty feet, the tubeway came to an abrupt end against a perfectly blank wall of burnished emerald metal similar to that which he had seen outside when he had first come upon the vast hull of the starship. He looked for a doorway, but there was none. He knew that he could not possibly have seen all the ship, even though he had traveled over two hundred feet since entering the portal part way along from the tubes of the rockets. For one thing, there had been no control room or observation deck. Indeed, those need have been only of a minimal nature, but there should have been something. And the crew quarters he had thus far seen, those small rooms off the main tubeway, could have slept no more than two dozen. Considering the microminiaturization of the ship, it would have been foolish to have built so huge a vessel for so few inhabitants. The theater alone had been large

enough to seat a hundred. So, though this was the end—it *wasn't* the end. It was a barrier of some sort, a fake partition meant to conceal the heart of the great vessel.

The Brethren had reached similar conclusions and had made several attempts to cut their way through the partition that denied them access to whatever further wonders might lie ahead. There was a powerful hand drill lying on the deck, a dozen broken bits scattered around it. Ti saw that one of the bits was an industrial diamond and that it had done no better than the bits which were tempered steel. There was a robot drilling device whose bit and arm were mangled into uselessness. It had apparently been applying maximum pressure when the bit broke, and the destruction had carried back along the heavy arm in the form of harsh vibrations. A second robot worker with a laser drill instead of the standard bit was scattered all over the end of the hallway in pieces no larger than a man's hand, indicating that it had been set to continue drilling no matter what—and that the energy of the pencil-thin light beam had carried back on itself to climax in an explosion of rather severe magnitude.

But the wall was totally unmarked. It was as if gnats had been flying against it. There was not the slightest scratch or impression upon the alien alloy.

Timothy flushed his psionic power through the partition and was able to distinguish the hollow areas of rooms, a good number of them, bisected by thin gray shadows which were walls. He could not see anything more than what an X-ray might reveal of a man's intestines, but it was enough to convince him of the necessity of conquering this barrier. The Brethren may have failed repeatedly at the task, but they were not as equipped as he was, did not have psi fingers to pry with, to rip, rend, and tear.

He extended those insubstantial fingers now, with the same naturalness he had once had for the direction of his servo hands. He slid them between the terribly dense molecules of the emerald wall.

When he felt that he had correctly ascertained the nature of the atomic patterns of the material, he spread his psionic

digits in an attempt to rip apart the very fabric of the structure before him.

Abruptly, his body expanded, exploding with a blinding white ball of flame, and flung itself apart in thousands of bloody pieces . . .

CHAPTER 15

Blackness welled up like pooling blood, swallowing all traces of light and life.

There was a sensation of falling, and the understanding that the fall would never end. There was no bottom to the well into which he had been dropped, for that well was eternity.

He tried to breathe, but there was no air in this place. Just as there was no sound, light, color, odors, or sensations of a tactile nature. This was only nothingness. Nothingness . . .

Then he found himself in one piece, leaping backward on his psionic legs, away from the wall. He rebounded from the side of the tubeway, cracking his head a rather solid blow. The pain from that encounter was welcome, for it was proof that he was still alive and functioning. He looked down at himself, nevertheless surprised to discover that he could still see and that what he saw was as it had always been. That excruciatingly horrible plunge into death had seemed too real to be an illusion—and yet that was exactly what it appeared to have been.

He was tempted to feel and pinch himself with his extra-sensory hands, to let out a yell of relief at the undamaged condition of his mutant husk. He had always enjoyed life, despite what he had suffered and the limitations his body had presented him with. But now, having experienced the mo-

ment of death, having suffered the micro-second spasm that somehow seemed to continue on and on, without regard to the passing of objective time, life was far more precious than it had ever been.

Now he saw why the Brethren had brought in the robot machines to breach the wall for them. The agony of dying over and over again, every time he set his drill bit to the sheen of that unearthly metal, would have driven a human workman mad.

The star people had incorporated an alarm into the wall to insure its sanctity. Or perhaps a better word than "alarm" was "deterrent." It was not a warning to the possessors of this vessel so much as a show of their muscle to those who would depose them. Some sort of structured subliminal broadcast was played whenever the solidity of the partition was endangered, thrusting deep into the fear centers of the brain and dredging up that most ingrained of fears—death.

There was only one pleasant thing about discovering this deterrent the hard way: the knowledge that, though they were races from vastly different star systems, their basic fears must be similar. Unless, in other species, the broadcast aroused fears of a different nature than that of death. It was impossible to say what some alien mind might find terrifying.

His optimism about their similarity was further shattered when he thought that the alarm-deterrent might very well have been set up after an analysis of the human brain. Indeed, to have compared mankind's struggling intellect to that of a race traveling casually between the stars was like comparing his fellow human beings to himself now that his psionic abilities were fully flowered. It was almost certain then. They had structured this deterrent after studying human intelligence. But how long ago? Ten years ago? A century ago? Ten thousand years ago?

He touched the metal with ESP fingers once more, threading the power into the molecules. Perhaps his problem had been in not exerting a sudden enough force—and thus being caught by a trap the aliens had laid for lesser men. They could not have been anticipating a psionically gifted

mind, much like their own, to attempt to destroy their handiwork.

He fed more power into the wall, between the small, tightly packed molecules.

It surged there, waiting for him to make some use of it.

He tensed himself. He was afraid, but there was no sense in admitting that to himself now.

Without warning, he blasted the ESP power outward in an attempt to rip the wall asunder . . .

. . . And staggered backward as his body was impaled on a dozen long and wicked spikes which sprung out of the wall and snapped angrily into his soft flesh . . .

Blood fountained up, splattering across the ceiling, dripping down the walls, and then the spikes were worked completely through him, and he was sliding and sliding and sliding down a very long trough, toward inky blackness. Somehow, he knew the slide would require several million years to complete . . .

When this vision passed, he found himself curled at the waist against the awful pain—both physical and psychological—of dying. The deterrent worked much faster than his ESP power ever could, negating any chance of opening the wall by force. He simply could not withstand too many spiraling down into the grave, artificial or real, without being thoroughly unhinged by them. And if he lost his sanity, he was not at all certain he would be able to make use of the extrasensory powers to heal himself. If his mind were unhinged, so might be his psionic abilities.

He floated before the shimmering emerald panel, searching for a switch that might send the wall up or sideways, knowing even as he looked that such a thing was impossible. This was no cleverly disguised door before him, but a thick and sturdy wall. As he had thought, there was no sign of a switch.

He did not even consider returning topside, to the mountainside home that had once been the main part of his life. That was unthinkable. Now that he had discovered the source of PBT and had cracked the hold of the Brethren on the underworld and on all the people addicted to their amber-colored drug, he needed another goal, something more

to be met and engaged and conquered. If he did not tackle the challenge of this wall, the time would have come when he would have to stop deluding himself about the unimportance of his new-found powers. He would have to plan for the future. And the future scared him. If he had been a freak in a normal world before, he was a superfreak now. There was no possible way he could fit into the fabric of modern society. No way at all.

His life had been a desperate race to be accepted, to have at least a goodly number of peripheral friends, if he had to be restricted to only Taguster as a confidant. *Enterstat* had connected him with the beautiful people, the favored, the talented, the wealthy. He had boosted himself into the second-echelon corridors of high society. Now he had completed the circle of his mutation and had passed out of their world, forever and without question. He was alone.

In the back of his mind he knew there was one other thing he could try—to get beyond this wall. And though it was a dangerous plan, it was far safer—psychologically—than giving up and returning to the surface. The answer was simple enough: he must teleport . . .

The problem was that he had only the vaguest of impressions concerning the area beyond this wall. It was not nearly enough to fix it in his mind as a solid point in space-time. As a result, he was not certain that, if he teleported without a distinct destination embedded in his mind, he would end up where he wished to go. He might find himself inextricably wound up in the molecular patterns of this partition, his own molecules hopelessly enmeshed in those of the emerald substance. It was not the pleasantest of thoughts—especially if it were to happen and he were to maintain his mental powers as he had while teleporting the first time . . .

Yet he had not known any exact co-ordinates when he had come to this farm from New England. He had known what it looked like and that it was close to Charter Oak, Iowa, but that was hardly hair-fine sighting. Perhaps an exact impression of the destination was not essential. If it were, then he could never teleport beyond this wall, for he would have to

be there first to ascertain the landscape. Therefore, he stopped worrying about it and decided to take the plunge.

The life he would have to lead once he was in the outside world again, and reported this to the United Nations was more frightening with each passing moment. And though his ESP might have expanded, his emotions were still primitively human. Out there, it would be an emotional problem, something his great power could not help him cope with.

He turned back to the green wall, examined it carefully, tried to establish a mental image of the ghostly X-ray he had seen of the chambers beyond.

He sucked in breath; the air seemed infinitely cooler than it had been moments earlier.

He teleported . . .

The time spent in transit was no different than it had been when he had taken the much longer jump from New England to the Brethren farmhouse. The landscape of the eerie, non-matter universe through which he passed like a beam of black light was just as it had been before: dark, singing yet silent, warm yet cold . . .

Then he was standing within the core of the vast ship, beyond the green barrier that had been erected to stop him. He felt a flush of triumph, of superiority—which a glance around at the marvelous ship dispelled immediately. He was at the very front of the starship, in a small chamber that served as a minimal guidance deck. It was very bare of decoration and contained only three seats, all on swivel bases, all heavily padded. He would have to walk backward toward the barrier through which he had traveled to see what the other rooms contained.

In this tabu section of the vessel, his curiosity had been whetted even further, and he had forgotten all about the future and his place in it. Or at least he pretended that he had.

As he drifted through the circular port of the guidance deck, into the tubeway that led to the next room, the alien voice spoke to him like sand spilling down a marble slope: whispers, whispers, whispers . . .

CHAPTER 16

“ . . . del esseda esseda esseda . . . quaol mi o esseda . . . esseda . . . ”

He came to an abrupt halt, the submerged fear rising as the cold, quiet voice echoed softly through the tubeway. He looked back into the room he had just left. There did not seem to be anything there, though the darkness made it difficult to tell for certain. He uncapped his psionic talents and searched that chamber, questing for the spark of life, the jumble of thoughts and impressions that would have accompanied even an alien mind. But he could find nothing.

Even as he searched ahead, he began to realize that the words had not been spoken, that they had impressed themselves in his mind without need for verbalization. That meant the speaker, using ESP powers, might not even be present.

He stood quite still for several minutes, waiting for a repetition of the words. When he was met with only silence and an uncomfortable feeling of being watched, he started forward again. Before he had progressed another half dozen feet further along the tubeway, the same, alien, cold whisper began again: *“ . . . saysi del esseda esseda esseda . . . quaol mi o . . . ”*

He stopped to listen but heard nothing more. At last he found his throat sufficiently unconstricted enough to say, “I can’t understand you.”

He did not think to impart the words without speaking them, as the alien had done. He was not yet quite accustomed to the new abilities of his mind. He had never even considered the possibility of telepathy, and he was more than a little stunned by the prospect now.

There was another minute during which nothing was said. Then another. Finally, when his patience had worn thin and he was prepared to advance to see if that would spark interest in the alien's part where there now seemed to be none, the soft, ethereal whisper came again—this time with the same sort of English that Timothy might have used himself.

"I thought that you were one of us." Despite the English, the voice was eerie, thin, rasped like the voice of a man stricken with some disease of the vocal cords.

"No," he said. "No." And for a horrible moment he was certain that his powers of concentration would desert him, that he would be able to do nothing more than babble inanely, like some mentally deficient child, at what was most certainly a historical moment, this first meeting of man and extraterrestrial. His feeling of inadequacy had been resurrected. He had not felt this insecure and worthless since his days in the hospital and the first year or so after his release. But then there were words, issued haltingly but nonetheless sensibly. Not profound, to be sure. He did not have the presence of mind, right then, to be philosophical. But sensible, at least. "I'm from this world—not yours," he said.

"In what manner did you gain entrance?"

"Teleportation," he said. That gave him at least a little pride. "Just as your kind used to travel from the rear portion of the ship to these private chambers."

"You know of us."

It was not a question so much as a statement, but he said, "Some. Not very much."

"How?"

"From deduction," he said. He recounted the things he had found since entering the starship, speaking swiftly in hopes that he was not boring the disembodied voice with ramblings which might seem relatively petty to it. For two races to meet

and speak, though they were of different and distant star systems, was a thing for wonder. Not for boredom.

He found he was perspiring. He felt as if he were on a great stage before an audience whose faces were invisible beyond the brilliant footlights, but which must number in the thousands.

"You speak of the Brethren," the whispering voice said, picking that piece of datum out of the information Timothy had supplied. *"Explain them, please."*

He obliged, explaining the nature of Brethren hierarchy, then of the Brethren activity itself. It was not that he felt all of the minute facts should be transmitted to the listening alien or that—once transmitted—they would serve any purpose through their illumination; it was more of a fear, actually, that if he stopped talking for even a short moment, the creature would have learned all that it wished to know and would send him on his way without satisfying his own curiosity. Or destroy him. That was what one expected, that was the stereotype procedure for all extraterrestrials. He was not surprised to realize that he would prefer being destroyed, just as in all the cliché horror stories, to being patted on the head and sent blithely on his way . . .

Again, a pause when he was finished. Then: *"And this PBT which you describe—what is the source of the name?"*

"From the words 'Perfectly Beautiful Trip,' which users coined when they learned the stuff had no chemical formula—known, anyway—from which to devise a catchphrase." It now seemed to be time for him to ask something instead of waiting for the next question. It was time to get at least a little of the situation under his control. He said, *"What is the drug? What is it made from?"*

"It is not a drug at all," the voice whispered. *"It is . . . plasma . . . blood. It is the blood of one of the six non-psionic races of the Inner Galaxy. Intelligent race, but no extrasensory perception. The medical room keeps a constant supply of it on hand for emergencies in which our guests might be injured. It is produced through our biological engineering module."*

Timothy tried to envision a race so alien in its physical

makeup that its blood was a powerful narcotic and hallucinogen to earthmen. He wanted to ask the speaker what they were like, then decided that was only infantile curiosity and that there were more important matters at hand.

"Where are you speaking from?" He asked. "I can't see you." He was anxious to examine the alien in its living state, to see how it walked, how its face moved when it talked, thousands of minutiae such as that.

"My cube. If you move into the next chamber, you will see me in my cube—you will see all of us."

Timothy floated down the corridor and into a large chamber, fully as extensive as the theater in the far rear of the starship. Suspended midway between the high domed ceiling and the floor, on single, finger-thick strands of coppery metal, were cubes of a smoky green transparent material in which the bodies of nearly two hundred aliens hung like flies in amber, staring out at the room without actually seeing anything there, immobile, quiet, but not dead. There was no doubt that life still seethed within these beings, for their faces were caught, not in slackness, but with expressions of fear, anticipation, and relief. The brother of theirs, in the other half of the ship, in the morgue drawer, was dead. Not these.

"The dead man in the drawer?" he asked as he recalled that frozen husk. "What happened to him?"

"A little over a thousand years ago, we ventured forth to explore your world, to see if it had changed in the million and a quarter years we had been sleeping here. He was killed by a bow and arrow. The wound was too sudden and penetrating for our psionic powers to go to his aide. When we saw the creatures of that time possessed intelligence but would require dozens of centuries to develop into anything we could contact, we entered these cubes again to wait. We wanted to solicit help for the repair of this vessel, but such would have been impossible with those semi-savages."

"And you have all been here, except for that short time, inactive for a million and more years?" It was impossible to conceive of that, and he felt old and tired when he tried.

"Hardly. We have frozen our bodies, but not our minds. We remain in intimate mental contact with our homeworlds,

with those we love. Our mates, our relatives and friends, have all died, of course. They lived their proper eight thousand years and passed on. But we keep in touch with our ancestors and with developments on the homeworlds. We take turns keeping watch over these inner sanctums of the ship. Life, you see, is much more than having a body whose metabolism continues."

He had always felt that way himself, of course. It would have destroyed him, quite early in life, if he had contained the physical egotism of a beach bum muscleman.

"But now it is possible for us to leave these cubes and seek aid from your people."

"No," Timothy said, realizing how harsh that word must sound to the creature in the cube, to all of them who had been waiting such an unimaginably long time.

"Explain?"

"I'm the only one of my kind who has the psionic powers you spoke of." He went on to explain his heritage, the artificial womb, and his expansion of ESP powers achieved through the application of alien blood. "I'm certain, now, that it was only because of my latent ESP that the chemical composition of the blood expanded my powers. It can do absolutely nothing for the others of my race—of that race. It can only lead to addiction and death. You've got to tell me how it can be rejected, with what counter drugs its hold on my people can be broken."

"May I scan your mind? I ask for this privilege only because I wish to ascertain the nature of your race, biologically, in order to deduce what effect the drugs of this blood could have had. It will be simpler than a question and answer period, and I'll learn more. If you wish your privacy unviolated, I will understand. But I assure you that I will only scan for what subject is in question."

Since the alien could have initiated the scan without his permission and, more than likely, without his knowledge, Ti could see no reason why it would violate its promise now. "Go on," he said.

He felt nothing as the unearthly fingers sifted through his large store of knowledge, though he did wonder what sort of

analogue the mind of this alien created to explain Timothy's thoughts. What would the analogue of his own subconscious mind look like? He did not mind the alien sopping up his life history so much as he was perturbed by the possibility of the creature seeing what condition his innermost mind was in, what hideous and twisted longings it might possess.

He was relieved when the voice hissed: *"I am satisfied."*

"What did you find?"

"Cold withdrawal," the alien said.

"But that's agonizing. They say it can even lead to death if someone is completely addicted."

"It's the best method and the most sure. There is no drug to combat addiction, for no earthly chemicals could have such effect and we never created such a drug, not having seen the need for one. The PBT, as you call it, latches on to the red corpuscles of the human blood. Each corpuscle-like cell of the alien plasma piggy-backs a human cell. If one withdraws, totally, the production of new blood will eventually do away with the old cells which have the alien corpuscles attached to them. The alien cells cannot transfer allegiance in their piggy-backing."

"Then by cutting the Brethren off from the source, we put an end, theoretically, to the problem."

"Not theoretically. Actually."

He realized, even as the alien whisper reinforced the certainty of its assumptions, that the time he had been dreading had arrived at last. He had achieved this interim goal and must now take time to worry over the future, to decide what it was to be like. How was he to cope with a world in which he was vastly superior to everything and everyone? There was no question that he was destined to be an outcast, without even the friendship of the most intelligent men, like Taguster. Mankind had spent centuries proving its disdain and often downright hatred for anyone different, anyone not conforming to the norm, whether that norm be dress, hair length, accent, political beliefs, or physical condition. It was easy to imagine, then, how great the hatred of a superman would be. Because, basically, the reason the average man hated anyone different could easily be deduced. He hated

anyone who seemed to have met the forces of normalcy, of conformity, of oppression and authoritarianism, who had met them and defeated them. It made him seem somehow less important, less of an individual, less worthy. The reaction to a superman who not only disregarded the rules of conformity, but who could smash them at whim, would be a thousandfold more vicious.

And then, how was he to find any task challenging enough to make it worth wrestling with? If his psionic powers made all things possible, then it must be true that they also made all things uninteresting. And a man needed something to motivate him, something to conquer. Otherwise he rotted.

Quickly, before he could wind his way into the maze of problems awaiting him, he asked, "May I return to speak with you further once I have taken care of the Brethren? I will not announce your presence. I'll buy the farm, if necessary, to assure the secret of the ship."

"You are avoiding your decision," the whispering voice berated him, the tone somewhat accusatory.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You know perfectly well. You must decide whether or not to go back into the world as you know it, back where you will be a greater freak than ever. A physical abnormality makes a man an outcast in your world. But a mental abnormality—be it either for better or worse, retardation or genius—leads to the same rejection, though even more swiftly and with more vehemence on the part of those expunging the undesirable element."

Ti nodded, having reached the same conclusion some time ago, even before he had fully developed his psionic awareness through the PBT. Mentally deficient men were damned to lives of ridicule, forced into lives of loneliness in basement rooms or in institutions. Society ignored them and patted its own back for, at least, not chaining them in dungeons as once was done. Men falling into the upper limits of genius were scorned by those less fortunate in intellect who demeaned them and their opinions at every possible opportunity. They preferred the blandness of the average. The less-than-average was worthy only of disdain by the middle. The more-than-

average was a target of jealous anger and petty accusations. It should not be that way, of course. But it was. And there was nothing he could do, even with his psionic powers, to change the thinking of an entire society.

Then, as if his mind had just finished mulching the fodder of the alien's comments, he turned to other things and suddenly remembered a forgotten morsel, one phrase with more meaning than he had at first attributed to it: ". . . whether or not to go back . . ." Whether or not. That implied that he had a choice of leaving the starship or remaining within its emerald metal walls.

"But I can't stay herel" he said, the words far louder and sharper than they had been intended, ringing on the cold walls with an echo of the panic and excitement building in him.

"Why not?"

Why not . . . ?

He almost laughed at the whispered brevity of that. Why not? The alien had made it seem like a black-and-white question when there were so many shades of gray involved! Should a man retreat from a world because he fears that he cannot easily cope with it? Should a man deny his race, the nature of the soul within him, simply because there is an alternative that may lead to less heartache than continuing as he has continued in the past? Should a man relinquish all the material comforts which have required years to acquire, all the most lavish luxuries of his society, in return for some esoteric, intangible benefits of the intellect which might be gained in the exchange? Should a man leave that which he is certain of for that which is mysterious, unsure?

Yes. His own calm and reasoned reply to the questions he had been posing startled him. Yes, a man should retreat from a world he fears he cannot cope with—if the reasons for his inability to cope lay with the nature of that world and not within himself. Yes, a man should deny his race and the heritage of it if his own race and its history deny him the right of that peace of mind. Yes, a man should exchange material possessions, no matter what the degree of status they represent, for intangible ones if joy lies with the latter and not the

former. Yes, a man should tackle that which is mysterious and frightening, for only in that manner can a man ever find satisfaction in himself and in the personal world which he has constructed around him.

"You would accept me?" he asked.

"It would be an easy matter on our part. We have accepted others of far stranger races than yours. Perhaps it would be difficult for you to accept us. You will have to learn and embrace our customs, language, and basic patterns of reasoning—which are all different than yours. It will be far more difficult for you to adjust than it was for me to adapt your language and cultural patterns. Our culture is far more complex. It is possible that, confronted with its intricacy, you could go mad."

"I doubt it," he said.

"I agree."

"But why do you want me? Why bother?"

"There are cubes. They are empty. You are the first psionic of your race. You will make an excellent emissary when the time comes for us to meet the rest of your race. And what reasons, on the other hand, could be argued against your acceptance?"

"But your shipmates—"

"Have heard every word that has been spoken between us, heard with a part of their minds, either as a major focus or a minor point."

"And they feel the same?"

"They do."

Timothy looked around the chamber at the hundreds of other dangling cubes, trapped between coppery strands of webbing, like surreal horses on an other-world merry-go-round. He was not frightened or repulsed by the prospect of spending centuries within one of those while his mind functioned in disembodiment on some far and nonhuman world.

"I would like that," he said.

"There are things you must attend to."

"Yes. The Brethren. The newspaper. It will not take very much time."

"When you return, all will have been prepared for your en-

tombment," the alien said. The greenish cubes glinted with stray pieces of light, their edges soft, now smooth, now struck with light again as they turned slowly, slowly, first to the left, then the right, too slight a movement to be easily discerned.

"I'll hurry," he said.

When the whisper did not reply, Timothy closed his eyes and gathered about himself the cloak of serenity necessary to a leap into the nonmatter continuum of teleportation. He conjured up a vision of the Brethren farm, of the darkling earth around it.

He teleported.

He had work to do . . .

CHAPTER 17

He found himself standing beneath the same willow tree where he had first arrived when he had teleported from the Brethren house in New England, though he had not made a conscious effort to return to the exact same terminus. He drifted quickly across the lawn, onto the porch where he found the slumbering bodies of Richard Boggs and the unnamed henchman who had been sitting in the swing. He entered the mind of the surgically created killer and wiped away whatever knowledge the man had possessed of the starship and the origins of PBT.

Richard Boggs's mind was somewhat more intricate. The analogue which Timothy's own mind established to deal with it was of a junkyard, where rusting, useless articles of the man's life rested in varying states of decay. Richard Boggs was a dreamer, a man with a million schemes all contained within him at once—none of them workable. He would be, until the end of his days, exactly what he was now: a second-rate hired man. In the junkyard, among the rust and the twisted metal, Timothy located that which he wished to expunge, and left the man ignorant of not only the source of the drug, but of its existence as well. When he woke, the letters PBT would have no meaning whatsoever for him.

He drifted into the house and did the same with Thelma Boggs, wiping out all knowledge of the drug and the starship.

Her mind was similar to her husband's, and the hopeless schemes she had were often ones he had cultivated first.

He went to the three Brethren whose minds he had explored earlier, and took away the selected bits of data from two of them. Moving faster now, more anxious to get this finished, he went outside and eradicated the starship and PBT from the memories of the rear door guard and from the mind of the man who had been patrolling the white picket fence.

When all of this had been accomplished, within a matter of ten minutes, he returned to the living-room, where the gray-haired Brother who had shot at him through the window lay on his face, his mind as yet untouched. Timothy delved deeply into the ancient library analogue and stirred through the thousands of books of thoughts, discarding them, throwing them on the floor when he discovered they were not what he wanted. In time he knew the name of every Brother who knew of the existence of the starship below the house. There were only four of them, all members of the Inner Circle of the organization. There was Leopold, of course. And three others who shared in the policy-making of the Brethren structure. He collected their addresses, permanent and alternate, then wiped the starship and the PBT out of the gray-haired gentleman's memories.

He floated into the darkness, over the dew-damp lawn, taking a moment or two to enjoy the fresh, untainted fragrance of the country air. The anti-pollution laws had slowly begun to have their intended effect on the cities, but they were not nearly so clean as this. He was well aware, as he filled his lungs and savored the crispness, that this might well be the last chance he would have for reverie for the next few centuries—or longer.

He looked at the stars overhead. They no longer seemed cold and distant and uncaring, but warm and close. They were things to be viewed as guiding beacons in the darkness. And soon, quite soon now, he would be there, among them, if only with his psionic abilities. He understood, looking at those far points of light, why the aliens could not simply teleport to their homeworld. Even the superhuman talents of the

fully developed mind could not cope with those vast reaches of space.

He closed his eye, blocking out the stars and concentrating on finishing what must be done here on earth.

He tensed every muscle.

The night was cool; he left it.

He dematerialized on that Iowa lawn . . .

. . . And materialized in the study of the New England house where he had so recently been a captive. The four men were still in the room, much the same as he had left them, though Leopold had awakened and was sitting on the couch with his head propped between his hands, trying—it seemed—to press the fog out of his brain in order to get his thoughts clicking properly once more. Margle was groaning and tossing his head restlessly from side to side, though he was still unconscious. The two apemen, Baker and Siccoli, were as contented as babes newly fallen into slumber.

Timothy slipped into the minds of the two henchmen and erased their knowledge of the existence of PBT. He did the same with Jon Margle, then pinched the nerves in the base of the man's neck again, sending him down into perfectly still sleep.

Next he entered Leopold's mind, as cautiously as possible, fearing that the bloated, roachlike insects that had poured out of the walls of the conscious mind might still be running free. But the things had either been driven back into the walls of the conscious mind or had returned of their own free will. The subconscious must fear and detest the conscious, he thought, as much as the aware portion refuses to have anything to do with the seamier concerns of the subconscious. In this manner, all of us may be schizophrenics in a private way, and thus cope with life far better than if we had to face it straight on, without compromises.

He listened at the wall.

He could hear them in there, and the sound was not reassuring. Buzzing, churning, squirming over one another in mindless, chitinous, slick brown-black fury.

Quickly he went up through the many floors of the data bank, searching out those things he wished removed from the

man's store of knowledge. He worked quickly within the analogue, then reviewed his work to make certain that he had not missed anything crucial. At last, satisfied with the job, he departed Leopold's mind.

The room was quiet. Outside the window, some species of songbird was plying its trade. He pinched Leopold's nerves in the base of his neck and sent the man into slumber again.

Three to go.

He tensed. He teleported . . .

. . . And arrived.

Ludwig Stutman, a member of the Inner Council of the Brethren, lived in an impressive estate near Baltimore, Maryland. The grounds were very extensive, every foot of them well cared for. The trees that formed a forest near the south end of the grounds seemed well pruned and surgically shaped to present the most aesthetically pleasing picture possible. There were no weeds and ground brush within the trees, only some crawling ivy and a few spots of tended flowers sprouting colorfully in black earth. Out of the forest, the lawn was as close-trimmed as the head of a Marine general, yet spongy like a thick carpet. Some special sort of grass, he imagined. Not native to this part of the country. More like the stuff that grows in Florida. The house, on the smooth top of a small knoll, was three-storied, made of dark stone. It had white pillars and a veranda, all the architectural touches of genteel living.

Crime, Timothy thought rather sourly, does pay, no matter what the FBI and associated branches might have to say.

He came up the long, twisted stone pathway from the wood, the night a bit cooler here than it had been in Iowa, his hair fluffing in the breeze and his eye watering a bit as the night air stung it. Three hundred yards from the house, he encountered the first guard.

He had not been expecting it, which was foolish. Stutman, like any of the Brethren hierarchy, would be well protected from authorities and from the renegades of the old-time Mafia who had refused to conform after their organization had been crushed and who might have a grudge to settle with one of the new crime bosses. When the tall, darkly dressed man ap-

proached him from a line of shrubs and shadows, he was startled.

He felt a warm wetness in his stomach, then heard the sharp snap of a pistol shot. The world seemed to tilt suddenly, and then the pain came, hard and rough-edged, tearing upward through his chest from his ruined belly.

There was a second, terrifying crack, the whine of a near miss, before he gathered his senses together fast enough to flush out with his psionic power a heavy wave of destructive force. He felt the insubstantial ESP crash over the guard, felt the millions of bright fingers of power seek the enemy flesh.

When he knew he was safe from the man, he withdrew the psionic weaponry and looked to himself. He was gagging blood, and the wound in the center of his body was pumping crimson fluid almost like a garden hose. He reached into himself, stopped the bleeding, and carefully began to knit the torn blood vessels.

Another bullet, from a different angle this time, snapped into the side of his skull, burrowed through the surface flesh and was gone. If it had been even half an inch lower, it would have torn through his oversized skull and destroyed the brain which contained the ESP power he needed to heal himself and save his life . . .

A second shot rang off the silver-capped trunk of his legs, making a sweet, poignant bell note in the crisp night air, a note that echoed through the wood below and was certain to draw more attention—attention that Timothy could not afford.

His confidence abruptly eroded by the turn in fortune, Timothy frantically flushed out his ESP power and dropped the second guard where he stood by a pine tree a hundred feet away. Then, moving swiftly, he drifted to the shrubbery from which the first guard had opened fire. He swept through the tangle of carefully tended greenery and hid in the shadows and the branches of a stand of bristled, heavily scented pines.

Gingerly and somewhat reluctantly, he touched his head wound. He felt weak and dizzy, both with the loss of blood and with the fear that permeated him. The wound was half

an inch deep, seeping blood, though not nearly so much as he had lost from the stomach wound. Hair and flesh were matted in a sickening bandage that helped to stifle what little fluid he was losing. Carefully he knit the ruined vessels with his superhuman power; almost all of them were merely capillaries and not major veins or arteries such as had been broken in the stomach wound.

On the knoll, like a dragon awakening from slumber, the house lights flicked on on all three floors, yellow illumination spilling almost gaily across the dark grass and changing it, in the instant, to a colorful, almost dyed-looking green.

There were shouted commands as other guards went into a search-and-destroy pattern they had worked out among themselves a thousand times before, preparing for a moment just like this. Some of the voices were disturbingly close to the place where Timothy was desperately working to mend himself so that he might be able to face and defeat them when the time came. And the time was coming swiftly.

Then arc lights on tall, gray poles, sedately concealed by the landscaping, burst into brilliant life all over the grounds, even down in the thick wood where he had arrived moments earlier. There were only a few points of shadow, one of them being the place where he hid now. In moments, they would find him.

He could not risk facing them with his body partially ruined. One or two more well-placed rounds might make him so weak that he would not be able to use his power to knit himself. And then it would not matter that he was the most powerful human being on the planet Earth.

Cursing himself for his stupidity in rushing into this without the proper amount of thought and consideration, he joined cell to cell, forced a speeded mitosis, grew new cells, replaced the dead flesh. The problem was that he was too excited about the offer of the whispering alien, the offer to join the extraterrestrials for the next few hundred years. For the first time in his life, he realized, he would be with people on his own level, people he could communicate with fully. More than one. Hundreds of them. And, if it meant that he would be inferior for a while, even that was a pleasant prospect. Ho

had never been actually inferior, not since that hospital stretch before his psionic abilities were discovered. And that had been a physical inferiority. It might be quite interesting to be among mental superiors who could teach him. Perhaps it was a longing for parental guidance which he had never known. All of this fled through his mind as he finished healing himself.

As he was finishing, one of the guards now searching the grounds found him and opened fire. Timothy deflected the bullets. He was ready for them now. He was cooler, more thoughtful than when he had arrived the first time.

He used his ESP to plunge the guard into sleep. The man staggered, tripped over his own feet, and crashed into the bushes, hanging there in a parody of crucifixion, snoring loudly in the cold air.

He moved out of the shrubs, back into the brilliantly illuminated lawn. He moved smoothly toward the house, reaching out with his mind to tap the glowing centers of the guards' thoughts, snuffing them out one at a time until the slumbering forms of the surgically created bodyguards lay all over the knoll.

At the front door, he used his ESP to throw the locks, pushed the portal inward, and drifted through. He caught a guard on the winding staircase to the second and third floors and pinched the nerves in his neck. The man fell against the railing, back onto the steps, and rolled over and over down a dozen risers to the floor below.

He made his way through two more men, and reached Ludwig Stutman in his business study on the third floor of the enormous house. Stutman was perhaps fifty years old. He was short, stocky, blond-haired and blue-eyed. He was, Timothy could tell without even probing the man's mind, a physical-fitness fanatic. His arms were developed beyond usefulness to that thick, rippling-muscled state that is good only for show and not practice. His chest was a barrel, expanded by weight-lifting and deep-breathing exercises. On his desk were jars of seeds labeled and arranged carefully as to vitamin contents.

"Who are you?" Stutman asked. He tried to match his phy-

sique with an equally manly fearlessness, but his terror was painfully obvious to both of them.

Timothy said nothing.

"Who?" Stutman insisted, as if it mattered more that he have a name for the man who had forced his way through Stutman's security than that he fend him off.

Timothy pinched the proper nerves.

Stutman fell back into the chair from which he had risen when Timothy entered the study. Even in total repose, the muscles of his bare arms were corded, the tissue of his neck stiff and twined like steel cables.

Ti carefully insinuated himself into Stutman's mind, his own mind forming an analogue that would allow him to seek out that data which he had come to erase from Stutman's memory.

It seemed proper that the conscious mind be represented by a gymnasium. Within the gymnasium were thousands of men working out, hoisting bars, doing pushups, climbing ropes, sitting in steam cabinets. It impressed Timothy that there were no women within the gym, no women at all.

Without pausing any longer to consider Stutman's sexual proclivities, he went through the gym, questioning those people he found there, and soon he had wiped out of the conscious mind all thought of PBT and its origins. He found a door in the far wall of the gym and went down into the subconscious.

Here the analogue was a hospital. Not the operating rooms, but the wards, full of diseased and dying people. There were cancerous patients, lepers, all the worst decay that man is heir to. Timothy supposed that anyone with such concern for his body would contain a seething cauldron of horror over sickness and death. He destroyed the thoughts he wished and quickly departed that place . . .

Stutman slept peacefully, his hulking body unaware that its most inner sanctums had been rudely violated, and some of the knowledge which sustained it in this luxury had been drained away.

Timothy let his thoughts congeal around the next address on his list. He pictured it clearly in his mind, as he had got-

ten it from the gray-haired man in the Iowa farmhouse. He tensed, teleported . . .

. . . And shimmered into existence immediately before the door of Arthur Leland's home.

Behind him, a bodyguard gasped, whirled, then fell over into sleep, his pistol clattering on the brick floor of the exterior foyer. He hit the floor, himself, with a thick, sickening *whump*.

Timothy unlocked the door, opened it, and went inside, closing it behind. The house was a supermodern one, the floor covered in thick shag carpet that in its richness resembled fur. The furniture was specially crafted, full of bold sweeps, brilliant colors, and daring designs that were all brilliant in themselves and somehow managed to complement, not compete, to form an even more attractive whole.

Somewhere, soft classical music was playing, almost an anachronism in the sleek plastic-and-vinyl-and-synthetics decor of the house itself. Yet this too seemed somehow to complement the furniture.

He listened, but heard no one.

It occurred to him that he was much like Red Death in the Poe story. Though these people locked themselves away in flashy, rich surroundings, in gaiety and pleasure, he found them, stalked them, and did with them what he wished. It was not an altogether pleasant simile . . .

He found Arthur Leland in a bedroom on the second floor. He was with a woman, a sleek, large-breasted black woman whose skin shone ebony and smooth as she maneuvered on the mattress to accommodate her lover. Timothy felt the low, pulsing ache, the sickness that he got whenever he was around the most stunning of women. He had thought that he had outgrown it in these last few hours. But now he knew that was not so. Perhaps he would always be burdened with it.

The woman shrieked, and Leland, sensing the source of her horror, rolled off the bed, fumbling in the pile of his clothes for a gun. Timothy tweaked him into sleep, and the Brethren chief slumped naked on the floor.

The black girl was almost to the door, her wonderfully smooth, dark body moving with the swiftness and stealth of a cat. Timothy put her to sleep as well.

Arthur Leland was a ladies' man, and Timothy's mind chose to use the analogue of a brothel to help the mutant search the man's thoughts. Almost all of them were erotic, or had erotic connotations, even when the thoughts dealt with business. But the hundreds of full-bosomed, smooth-thighed women who represented the thoughts of Arthur Leland only made Timothy's aching quasi-sexual longing worse than it had been. He wished his own mind could have come up with a less disturbing analogue.

The subconscious was a madhouse of sado-masochistic sexual longings, disgusting, ugly dreams that made Timothy spasm with disgust and uneasiness. He wanted to withdraw swiftly, retreat from both these places of flesh, but he gritted his teeth and remained, doing the job that he had come to do, that he must do if the future were to be as he planned it.

Finally, he left the mind of the Brethren master and floated again within his own body in the dimly lighted bedroom, trying to regain his senses. He had been inundated with sensual visions, exotic dreams of virility, potency, pleasure. His perspective, now, was tilted, and he knew it would require more than a second or two to settle into his normal state of mind. Until he accomplished that, he could not risk proceeding with the plan, for fear he would act foolish once again, as he had when he had first arrived at Stutman's house and been shot.

Unconsciously, he had drifted across the chamber to the fallen body of Leland's dark mistress. With ESP fingers, he reached out and touched the softness of her flesh, traced his feeling yet invisible fingers along the forbidden mounds and depressions of her body.

He did this for a long time. He did not realize how long. When the trance broke, at last, he pulled away, ashamed of himself, confused and worried.

He left the bedroom and floated along the quiet corridor. He found a reading room where the shelves were filled with

nothing but erotica. He left there in more haste than he would have liked, for haste indicated a reluctance to face this most basic part of his makeup.

He forced himself to go back. Once in the room again, he inspected the volumes of prose, poetry, photography and art that Leland had collected to satisfy his almost obsessive curiosity about sexual matters. It occurred to Timothy sometime later that he could one day know the sensual world if he wished. Certainly with the knowledge of the aliens at his disposal, man would learn the secret of cloning, a process believed possible even today but hampered in practicality by the primitiveness of modern science.

Cloning: Take a single rabbit cell. It contains all the genes and the stringy chromosomes of the animal. From it, all the characteristics of the animal can be ascertained. And from it, an exact duplicate of the first rabbit can be made. Scientists can clone a copy. Or will be able to some day. And the same thing for a man. It was not inconceivable that very beautiful people would allow—for a price—scientists to clone a copy of them from one of their cells. Then, as science further developed, a brain transplant, moving another man's memories and gray tissue into the new body, would be a simple procedure.

One day, perhaps, he would know sensuality. No, not perhaps. He was certain of it. One day, he could have a mistress such as the dark girl, any sort of mistress he wished. And then, no area of human experience would be closed to him. He would be the first totally free man in the history of the race.

He was not totally free now, even with his ESP. And there was no sense in pretending that he was.

He put the books back on the pine shelves, exactly where he had gotten them.

In the hour since he had left Leland's mind, he had faced up to this one inadequacy of his, had met it head on, and had—if only temporarily—come to terms with it. There was no use wishing for what you could not have. In the centuries before him with the aliens he would forget this lack of sexual feeling. And when he was within his own body again and

prey to the distant, awful ache of longing, mankind might be able to develop to the point of doing something about it.

He breathed more easily as the ache dissipated. He thought of the smoothness of the girl's flesh. The ache did not return.

Smiling, he began to summon the address of the final Brethren chief into his mind, to build a picture of the house where he must go on the final leg of his mission. He was at ease. He had been through the worst of it now—physically, anyway. As it turned out, his final target was to cause him the most mental and emotional anguish of the night . . .

CHAPTER 18

In comparison with the other Brethren chiefs which Timothy had visited that night, Jacob Westblom lived simply. It was not necessarily simple by the standards of the average man, but quite so considering the millions of Westblom, like the others, must have amassed in his years of illegal activities. The house, near Albany, New York, was built in English Tudor style. It was a beautiful house of nine rooms, built sometime in the early part of the century. It was of solid brick construction with black-trimmed windows and shutters, a many-paned bay window off the living-room, now softly tinted with the amber light of a single lamp that burned in that room.

He watched the house from a distance, positioned across the street in the residential neighborhood where Westblom lived. The man had perhaps three acres of ground, but other houses were close enough nearby that he could not have flaunted a plethora of well-armed guards. Timothy searched through the tangle of mind emanations that swarmed in the suburban air, and finally found three of the strange, nearly blank minds of the surgically created killers. He snuffed each of them into unconsciousness, then crossed the street, picked the iron gate lock with his mind, and entered the grounds of the house.

He reached the front door, went through, closed it behind.

There was the sound of talking from the kitchen. He reached out with his ESP, found a butler, out of uniform, and a chauffeur in jeans and tee-shirt drinking beer at the kitchen table. He put them to sleep.

He searched the rest of the house but found no one in any of the other eight rooms. It meant that Jacob Westblom was not at home and that he would have to try the alternate addresses which he had gleaned from the minds of the Brethren in Iowa. One of those was a nightclub. Two more were restaurants. Another was a brother's residence, a blood kin of Westblom who was not involved in the underworld. And eleven more were the addresses of women.

But there was something else curious about the emptiness of the house. Would Westblom be satisfied with three exterior guards to protect the sanctity of his domain? Wouldn't he station one or two others within the house as a final barrier to his enemies? He did not believe that Westblom could be that much less paranoid than his fellow underworld chiefs—or that he had that much less real danger to fear from enemies that had once belonged to the powerful Mafia.

Timothy floated into the kitchen, where the servants slumped over the table. A can of beer had been knocked over. It ran down onto the floor, and the malt smell of it was heavy in the air. He moved first to the well-groomed, salt-and-pepper-haired butler and dipped into his mind, skimming across the conscious level of it in search of anything that might tell him of Westblom's whereabouts.

In seconds, he found what he wanted. He discovered that the old man was in the hospital, recovering (or so everyone hoped) from a cerebral hemorrhage which he had suffered only that morning.

For a moment, Timothy was tempted to skip Westblom, to trust to the Brethren leader's sickness to destroy his memory—if not all of him. But that was folly, considering the importance of this mission not only to the fate of thousands of addicts but to his own future as well. He obtained the hospital's address and a visual impression of it from the butler's mind, tensed, closed his eyes, and teleported . . .

He arrived outside the building, a monstrosity of yellow

brick and aluminum, in the middle of a pedestrian slidewalk, floating above the rolling rubberized tread that stretched in both directions. It had been stupid, he chided himself, to forget that he might pop into existence right before some startled citizen's eyes and cause an uproar where he wanted anonymity. This was not, after all, the sort of quiet, closed grounds where Brethren officers lived, but a public structure.

A moment later, he drifted into the main lobby of the hospital, the odor of disinfectant and flowers' heavy and somewhat unpleasant in the home of the sick. He looked over the roster of in-patients on the public board, and located Westblom's room. It was on the eighteenth floor, but the elevators were manned with scrubbed young women who insisted on a pass from the desk. And he knew he could never obtain one. Passes to Westblom's room would be difficult for the President to get.

The stairwells were closed at this hour, the heavy fire doors locked and chained. And though he could have picked the locks and removed the chains, the noise would surely have attracted the attention that he must avoid at all costs.

He found the directory of the hospital floorplan on an end table in the visitors' lounge and paged through it until he was able to pinpoint Westblom's room. But it was not going to be easy to teleport out of a busy lobby without causing some sort of furor. He found the men's room, feeling rather ridiculous, and when he was alone within the ammonia-fumed confines of the john, he tensed, concentrated on the position of the room, and blinked into the nonmatter universe of instantaneous transmission.

In Westblom's hospital room, he was confronted with a nurse, a stout woman in stark white clothes wearing ridged, squeaking shoes and walking around the bed checking on the monitoring devices there, especially the bleeping electrocardiograph. She looked up, took a few steps backward, rubbed at her eyes as if she were unwilling to believe that a man—or something resembling a man, anyway—had appeared before her eyes magically, out of thin air.

As she opened her mouth to scream, Timothy silenced her. He did not let her drop rudely to the floor as he had the men

he put to sleep earlier in the evening. He used his ESP to cushion her weight, to swing her around and into the chair where she had been sitting earlier, reading a paperback novel.

In the bed was the withered husk of a man, punctured by needles which led to tubes which lead to bottles of clear liquid dangling overhead on a bright stainless steel stand. The pulse of intravenous feeding continued, despite the excitement in the room. The man's mouth hung open, gaping like the mouth of the dead—though there was still a great deal of life in the old bastard.

Timothy slipped psionic fingers into the man's mind and brain to see exactly how much life. He found that the damaged area of the organic brain tissue had pretty much settled down to normal and that therapy of some sort must have been administered, since other cerebral areas had begun to take over a few of the functions of the small, deadened section. This was ample evidence that it would be foolish to trust to the stroke or death to silence the old man.

Carefully, he slipped into Westblom's mind, searching through an analogue of a data storage system housed in a great, windowless building, much like the analogue of Leopold's mind (did ambition and ruthlessness breed the same sort of men?). He discovered the information about the starship and the origins of PBT. It had not been stored in those banks of memories which had been burned out by the hemorrhaging.

He began fiddling with the analogue controls of Westblom's data bank, attempting to eradicate the crucial facts. But the walls of the place began to tremble, and the data tapes set up an ungodly squeal of protest as he worked. He soon realized that any toying he did caused the mind and, by association, the brain to erupt in turmoil and fear that could easily lead to another stroke. And another stroke, so soon after the first, was almost sure death for the man.

He withdrew his fingers of ESP, returned completely to his own twisted body, and considered the problem.

If he let Westblom alone, the man would live. He was strong. His heartbeat was steady. His will to survive—that,

Timothy was certain—was the most forceful thing about him. And, surviving, he would remember the starship and the drug, a memory that would totally destroy all the careful blanking work that he, Timothy, had done this night in other minds. Yet, if he thrust his psionic fingers into Westblom and manhandled his mind long enough to abolish the information, he might very likely kill the Brethren officer in the process. He thought of bursting blood vessels and darkening brain tissue . . . it was not a pleasant pair of alternatives. The Lady or the Tiger? No, it was more like the Tiger or the Lion. Both choices made him despair.

As he stood there, listening to an occasional gurgled comment from the bottle of glucose, listening too to the heavy breathing of the nurse, he argued that Westblom was a parasite working the underbelly of society, had been a parasite most all his life. He had probably been associated, if not an integral part of, the old Mafia before switching allegiances and rising through the ranks of the Brethren. His food and his clothes, his Tudor house, and even the medical care he was now receiving to prolong his life had been bought on the agony and the death of other human beings. He preyed on the weak and the confused and lived well on the meat he was able to rip from their bones.

The bottle dripped.

The nurse snored.

Otherwise, quiet.

Though Timothy believed every word of the arguments that he was giving himself, though he agreed with the placing of all inflections, they were just not enough to justify the murder of Jacob Westblom—at least, not a murder as cold and efficient as this. Especially not a murder of a man who had not raised one finger against him personally. With Klaus Margle and his henchmen it had been easier, for they had been shooting at him, actively engaged in trying to destroy him. It was a matter of self-preservation that night, and demanded more of a gut reaction than this. That was what made him different than these men, he told himself. He could not treat another human being, another man of his own race,

with such ruthless objectivity as they treated others. Murder . . . he could not.

Unless . . .

The idea that rose within his mind was a bold one. It was also shameful. A cop-out of sorts. An attempt to delude himself into ignoring the very real moral problem that confronted him. It was not the sort of thing he liked to see in others, let alone in himself. But, damn it, it just might work . . .

He extended his psionic power into Westblom's mind, delved down into his subconscious world, whose analogue was a series of caves beneath the data storage building. He wandered through the slime-walled depths where id lusts and ego dreams crawled and slithered, lurking in nooks and crevices as if afraid of the light he carried.

They chittered at him. They growled. They moaned. They tried to snatch away his light.

In the brief moments they could not avoid the light, they leered, faces hideous and twisted.

He allowed the crawling, chittering, cancerous beasts of Westblom's mind to brush against him, to lay wet and clammy hands on him, drag decaying fingers down his spine. He listened to them until he thought he understood the language they spoke. He learned all the basest, most horrible traits his victim possessed, forced himself to indulge in it until he was sickened into the core of his soul.

No one's id and ego should be probed, prodded, teased, and finally dissected like that, Timothy knew. It could end in his own gibbering insanity if he were not careful. The flowing tide, thrusting forward and ebbing back only to thrust forward again, of incest, murder, sadism, masochism, bigotry, blood-lust, hate, fear, power-hunger, all these were not meant to be studied and turned over in his ESP fingers. But the incident did exactly what he wanted it to do. It stirred up a deep and unremitting loathing for this Jacob Westblom, this sick old man in the expensive private hospital room. He knew Westblom better than he had ever known anyone, knew all of the perverted things that drove the man. It was true, of course, that Timothy himself must surely possess subcon-

scious lusts and motivations equally as evil and depraved as those Westblom unknowingly nurtured—just as every man's subconscious is a dumping ground for that which he could not bear to consider consciously. But Ti ignored that now, working his hatred into a full-blooming garden, raising his monument of hatred to higher and higher peaks. At last, when he had somewhat deluded himself into thinking of Westblom as exactly what his id projected and nothing more, as an animal more than a man, he went back into the conscious mind to the data banks where the memories of the starship and the PBT were stored.

He selected the proper tape from the storage niche, a flat gray spool.

The walls of the mind analogue, white plaster like those of Leopold's mind, shook from floor to ceiling.

He concentrated on remembering Jacob Westblom as an animal, a lust-crazed, power-mad creature with no human qualities whatsoever, a comic book creation of evil.

He remembered the look of the stroke-damaged brain tissue, but he blanked that memory immediately.

He ordered the tape erased.

He tried to be careful, tried not to destroy the mind and the brain beyond that. His goal was still not Westblom's destruction, but the erasure of this information from the storage vaults of his mind. If he could preserve the man's life at the same time, so be it.

He wished that he could heal Westblom with his ESP power. But, again, he knew that the brain was too intricate, too mysterious, for his still coltish powers to heal. And injury there was permanent.

The lights dimmed.

Cracks appeared in the walls.

Timothy held down on the erasure control, though he was weeping and gagging and desperately wanted out of that place. He had never been in a dying mind before, and the absolute terror of the destruction almost drove him beyond the bounds of his own sanity.

Part of the analogue roof tumbled down around him, dust

exploding in great, obscuring clouds. Above the roar of the demolition, there echoed a faint and distant scream . . .

When he was done and had left the mind of the dead man, not bothering to finish erasing the tape, he knew that the trick of pretending that the subconscious was representative of the whole man had worked to help him get the necessary job done, had given him the ability to kill—but that it was a delusion that would not help to assuage his own guilt in the years to come. That was something no number of tricks could cope with.

The electrocardiograph had stopped its incessant bleeping and was humming a sharp, electronic note.

The nurse still slept.

Otherwise, still quiet.

He looked at Westblom, although he did not want to. He wanted only to get out of there, to be away from the smells of sickness, the white walls, the starched and supercleanly nurse, the low humming of the heart-watching machine which meant death, death, death . . .

He saw that the stroke had twisted the thin, aristocratic nose, setting it out of line. There was a darkening of the facial flesh, and in some areas, especially just under the eyes, it was perfectly blue-black. The mouth was still open. One hand had clenched the sheets in the last moments of life, had twisted them up and through bony, white fingers, as if they could save him.

He tried to recall the picture he had gotten of Westblom from his subconscious, all the lusts and perversions, all the ugly, twisted desires that had been the inner core of the man. But he could not get that all together again.

Strangely, the vision that appeared was of the naked black girl, lying on Leland's bedroom floor. He shook that off.

He tensed. Teleported . . .

CHAPTER 19

His house was a painful place now, for more than one reason. Looking at it, he saw the old Timothy, the man he had once been but could never be again. The flowering of his ESP and the centuries to come with the aliens had and would continue to change him beyond recognition—at least mentally and emotionally. Also, he was pained at having to leave this place. Even if it was no longer he, no longer relative and important to the man he had become, it was a link with the past, a tenuous connection to the rest of humanity. Leaving it would be the final, indisputable indication that there would never be any going back.

He went into the basement and sat through a senso-tape show on his tri-dimension screens. But he flicked it off, bored, a few moments before it was to end. In the shooting range he pulled off a couple dozen rounds into the targets, but gained no flush of achievement when they were all bull's eyes. Upstairs in the library he still felt a faint glimmer of belonging, among the books and tapes and knowledge. But even this was not as strong as it had once been.

He slid the panel back on the comscreen controls and dialed George Creel's home number. He had to wait only a short moment before the dark man answered.

"Hello, George."

He could see that Creel was startled. He remembered,

then, that he had been gone for several days. They had kidnapped him and taken him to that New England house, and for three days or more he had been fed PBT. Somehow that seemed like a hundred years ago. None of it mattered any more, and it had retreated to the depths of his mind. Creel, too cool and self-assured to lose his sense of calm, did not burst into a list of hysterical questions.

"You been gone awhile," he said.

Timothy nodded. "Longer, it seems, than I really was."

"You didn't leave a message. And after the SAM thing the day before, I didn't know exactly what was coming down. So I contacted the police. Not publicly. I knew you wouldn't want that in the event it wasn't some sort of foul play."

"Fine. And you can call the police off the trail."

Creel nodded.

"No time for explanations, George. And, besides, I'm not up to it. George, I want you to turn on your tape machine. Record the rest of this call."

Creel's eyebrows raised a little, but he complied. "Go ahead," he said a moment later.

"George, I am using this call as a legal transaction. You've got the picture and a vocal record. Pattern checks can be run on my voice. I am delivering control of *Enterstat* and all related companies and stocks into your hands."

For the first time in their long association, Timothy thought that he saw Creel totally disarmed and confused. The dark man was normally granite; he had suddenly become jelly. Ti watched, amused, well aware that the transition back to granite would require only seconds. George Creel was not a weak man.

"You can't mean that you—"

"Let me talk, George. I'm handing everything over to you, and I'm appointing you president and sole maker of company policy in my absence. You will draw a salary either seven times that which you now receive or fifteen percent of the yearly net profits on a projected scale, whichever is higher. In the event that I should not return or make my whereabouts public before the end of your lifetime, you will make arrangements for a capable member of your staff to pick up these

reins when you retire or die. There shall be no question, upon your abdication of the seat of power, who shall take your place. Is that clear?"

"But—" The jelly state was metamorphosing swiftly into a granite facade again. The only thing that betrayed Creel's confusion was his voice. His face was in repose, his hands still and without any visible nervous spasms.

"Is that clear?"

"Hell, yes! But you can't—"

He interrupted and continued. "This company must be established so that it may never be sold by the government tax structure under the assumption that I am deceased. No matter what length of time has passed. Clear? No matter how many years, even hundreds of them. If precedents must be set, use our legal equipment to try it. And if the courts decide against us, then turn the company into a nonprofit organization, with thirty percent of the yearly profits, after investments and debt payments, to be put into a bank account in my name and the name of a second nonprofit organization. Sixty percent of the interest of the account will go to some other charitable cause. The principal must never be touched."

Creel was jotting notes.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Not that I can think of."

"May I ask a question or two?"

"What?"

"What has happened?"

"The ESP," Timothy said.

Creel nodded. "I suspected that much. Fully developed?"

"I can't imagine it going any further. Teleportation. Telepathy. Levitation of any weight. You name it."

Creel showed no surprise. "So I'll not be seeing you again?"

"I doubt it."

"You will be drawing on this account?"

"Not that I know of."

Creel looked at his notes. "I'm not sure what I should say. Thanks, I guess."

"Don't say anything."

"I envy you," Creel said.

"I know."

Creel nodded. "You make what I have achieved look like nothing. I had color to overcome. You had everything."

"I've admired you, George. And for the same reasons."

They were quiet awhile.

"So." Creel dropped his pencil.

"Goodbye, George," Timothy said. And it was one of those rare times when he broke the comscreen connection between them first.

He left the comscreen and went back through the house. He drifted across the darkened rooms to the sliding glass doors, opened them, and went onto the terrace which overlooked the descending blanket of pine trees. The smell of pine was rich and refreshing. Distantly, in the night, there was the sound of a passing grav-car, the flickering light traversing from east to west, then gone.

He had stood here not too very long ago, watching a flock of birds settling into these trees. He had been using servohands then, and he had been a confused, disturbed man who had managed to cope with the world but only by ignoring certain things about it. Now he was grown. Taguster had died, and he had avenged his death. And he had grown . . .

Several minutes later, he realized that he had not directed Creel to close the house and board the windows. Then he smiled, remembering the man's efficiency. Creel would not have to be told.

At last, there was no reason to delay any longer. And he was more eager than ever to begin the new life ahead. Memories could be abandoned, or anyway, wrapped and stored. They were the memories of another existence. Tonight he would be reborn. He held down the intangible lump in his throat, the wad of nostalgia that—unreasonably—threatened to rise and plague him.

He tensed.

He smelled the pine.

He teleported . . .

In the great main chamber of the alien ship, the cubes of mysterious green smoke hung, still on the metal threads, like the art forms of a primitive man—or of a supermodern one. The feeling of belonging rose in Timothy again, a sense of companionship he had never known anywhere before—not even when he was with Leonard Taguster. This was his home, with these people from another star—if only until his own race evolved into the creatures that time and history meant them to be.

"You have settled your affairs—the things of which we spoke before?" the whisper asked.

"I have," he said. He felt more at peace than ever in his life, and his even, unemotional voice was evidence of that.

"The cube is ready."

"I see," he said, his eye circling to the cube that rested at floor level, the smoky green within seeming to curl and move.

"You are afraid?"

"Somewhat."

He realized he had spoken silently, with his telepathic ability. It was the first time he had slipped into this mode of communication as naturally as he had always used speech before.

"Do not be afraid. Ignorance and darkness are the only things to fear. You are leaving those things behind. You are entering a world of knowledge and light."

He entered the empty cube which rested at floor level, a circular port open in its side. The portal slid shut behind him, and the cage began to rise on the brass cable, up toward the median point between ceiling and floor where the other inhabited cells waited.

As it rose, the air within it began to grow thick, roiling about him much like a gas. Soon the stuff filled the cube. In moments, the atmosphere was like water, so thick he could feel it, run hands through it, name a texture for it. Then it was much like syrup . . .

He began to lose conscious awareness of his body, though his mind functioned on a higher plane than ever before. It was as if the mind's energy, freed completely from control of

the temporal shell, could now be directed solely into conscious thought.

At last, the inside of the cell was as solid as the walls which formed it, a brick of cloudy emerald in which he was suspended. The cube stopped rising and rested beside the others which contained these men from a distant time and place.

"Welcome," a great many whispering voices said, all the same, cool and smooth like polished ice. They were friendly voices.

He could not think what he should say, how he should react. He had been born unwanted and unloved, an object rather than a living human being. The king had sent his men to kill the baby Timothy, and he had been rescued at the last moment by others more sympathetic to human need. He had gained fame as a troublemaker while entering the years of his young adulthood. Then he had been persecuted. And now, in a strange way, he had died and been resurrected. Now, after he had left his bodily form behind, he had found a place where he was wanted and in which he might, someday, be loved.

"Yes," the voices said, cool voices, voices of a limitless people accepting him.

"Let's go," the most familiar of the whispers said. "*There's nothing more of interest here.*"

"Go? Where?"

"*To the stars. Let your mind follow in the wake of mine. I will show you how.*"

Ahead: infinity. Behind: the past . . .

. . . And maybe the future too, when the time came for mankind to know of the starship below the quaint Iowa farm, to know of the creatures who had waited so long within.

But that was a long time from now—and the stars laid in between.

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HELL TOMORROW!

Timothy was not human—not if by human you mean a man with two arms, two legs, two eyes. Of the first criteria, he had none at all; of the last, only one. And even that one was misplaced.

Timothy was born of human stock, of course—but not of woman. He was a product of the artificial wombs, a strictly military venture, and when he was born the technicians shrugged, and consigned him to custodial care. They expected him to die within five years, like most of the freaks.

It was in his third year that they discovered Timothy to be something more than human. Cheated of a normal life through his physical deformities, nature developed his brain—and talents that were peculiarly his. Talents that would help him survive in a world made for the normal people—survive, and perhaps even more!